

THE DOOM OF THE DANCING-MASTER. *By Charles H. Ross.*

THE FIRST FIGURE.

IN WHICH A HUNGRY WOLF SEERS WHOM HE SHALL DEVOUR.

- STEP I.—THE COMING OF THE WOLF.
- II.—THE LAMBS.
- III.—THE WOLF FEEDING.
- IV.—FURY OF LAMBS.

STEP I.

ONE glorious summer's day a certain careworn, hatchet-faced, ragged rascal climbed half over a stile, leading suddenly from a flowery meadow into a picturesque village street; and, taking his seat there, gazed complacently down upon what was before very long to be the scene of his death—a violent and cruel death; and he smoked his pipe as he did so.

You could hardly have wished for a better place to look at. There was an old gray Norman Church, overhung with ivy and embowered in rich foliage, its windows glazed with thick green bubbled glass, its graves covered with myriads of daisies, its grave-stones all awry and toppling over.

There was an inn, with a horse-trough outside, and a wide-spreading oak throwing a pleasant shadow upon it, and a couple of benches placed there for the accommodation of thirsty souls—beast and man; and it was an inn, seemingly altogether made up of gable-ends botched together anyhow, with huge stacks of chimneys on the roof.

There was a curiously clumsy stone bridge crossing a very small river, for which it was several sizes too big, very old and moss-grown; and the hulling murmur of mill-water might be heard not far off, somewhere behind the trees.

There was a row of odd little shops, and a dozen or so of cottages, with portals half-smothered in honeysuckles and creeping jennies, and a row of huge trees enshadowed the "causeway," the crookedest little bit of pavement you could well have found within three hundred miles of the sound of Bow Bells.

It was about five in the afternoon. The heat of the sun had subsided. The village street was at that moment quite deserted, except by a particularly noisy and demonstratively busy bee, who came buzzing furiously past the ragged rascal's head.

Everything around seemed to speak to the weary wanderer of rest, and comfort, and tranquillity. Here anyone might seek shelter from the cares and anxieties of the feverish, struggling London life. Most certainly East Haggford must be a little heaven upon earth.

It was nothing of the kind. It was the hardest, meanest, most pitifully narrow-minded little place any lover of his species, philanthropically disposed, ever had the misfortune to wander into.

Among the thousand and one errors of a misspent life, the most fatal that this ragged rascal ever committed was coming here and trying to settle down.

This person was, however, no philanthropist, and was mostly concerned in looking after the interests of number one with assiduity. As to number two, three, and so on, they were only interesting to him as persons who were to be fleeced when there was a chance.

Our dusty, travel-stained friend was, in truth, nothing but a common thief. I feel ashamed of introduc-

ing you, gentle reader, to such company; but, as you see, I have already intimated that he eventually (before very long, too) will come to a bad end. This ought to allay unnecessary hostile criticism, and, besides, dear ladies, he formed a not altogether unpicturesque figure in this pretty rustic scene.

His boots were very queer; his coat—a tail-coat—was out at elbows; the knees of his trousers were worn threadbare. He was desperately tightly buttoned up; and there could hardly have been any doubt in the mind of even the most credulous but that this was because he wore no shirt beneath.

But he had a rollicking way of wearing his battered hat on one side that suited him immensely; and he wore a ragged red silk handkerchief round his neck, which was altogether wrong, yet remarkably becoming.

But he wore a shirt collar, tolerably clean, and showed a good deal of shirt cuff with studs of much brilliancy, and he had a flower in his button-hole.

And he wore one dirty lavender kid glove!

He had long silky hair, tossed wildly about. He had bright, flashing eyes, with perhaps a gleam of madness in them at times. He had handsome features, with a fearless, honest look. He had been several times in jail, and was an incorrigible vagabond.

You would have stared this fellow hard in the face, and he would have returned your inspection without finching. Then you would have trusted him, and he would have cheated you to a dead certainty.

When he had drawn a whiff or two from his pipe, he found that the tobacco in its bowl was exhausted, and he knocked out the ashes upon the stile by his side, as he sat there swinging his leg.

"There!" he said, aloud: "I've had my breakfast. I'll put away the breakfast things."

He put away the pipe as he spoke. He was, in his way, evidently a humorist.

When he had put his pipe away, he gazed again anxiously around him, and still spoke aloud.

"After all," said he, "a good strong pipe is as satisfactory as a real meal—almost—and cheaper. What a quiet place this is!"

It was, in truth, very quiet. Even the boisterous busy bee had now taken her departure. The music of the mill-stream and the chirping of the birds among the trees were the only sounds he heard, save the tones of his own voice.

He seemed to be rather partial to these tones, and went on talking.

"What a wonderfully quiet little place! Some simple little spot this is, that the wicked people haven't found out yet. It might be the end of the world; but I shouldn't think it was the sharp end. The sort of place, now, where a poor, hunted-down wretch, like me, might spend a holiday in. A rare place for a rogue's holiday—out of reach of the telegraph, unknown to the police. I might settle down in a spot like this, and turn over a new leaf, and become honest. These three years past I've been starving all over the rest of the United Kingdom, and I am sure I've given it a fair chance. I'd have settled anywhere if they would have let me."

It was certainly rather an odd peculiarity about our rogue that he should take the trouble to tell lies about himself to himself. He had several other peculiarities, though, as we shall see when we come to know him better.

"Upon my word," said he, after a pause, "I have a good mind to give this place a trial! The only question is, how to commence, and shall begin hungry? There must be something good to eat at the inn, if I have only money or credit. But I've neither—that is to say, neither to spare."

He, nevertheless, rummaged over his ragged pockets, hoping that he might find, by some miracle, an overlooked shilling in an out-of-the-way corner. No such luck!

The net contents of his pocket amounted to fourpence-halfpenny, and the halfpenny was one more valuable for tossing purposes than for general circulation. It was a coin with two heads!

However, he really was dreadfully hungry. His breakfast, half an ounce of tobacco, had lasted all day, painfully eked out. He must get something to eat now—honestly, if possible, but he must get it.

One wonders at the courage and audacity—foolhardiness is, perhaps, the better word—of some desperate wretches like this. With his hat jauntily cocked on one side of his head and his hands thrust into the pockets in his coat-tails, he swaggered down the village street, humming (if you have no objection) an air from "Trovatore."

I hardly know how to bring the appearance of this fellow clearly before your view. He was not as ragged



DR. TRUMAN PROFFERS ASSISTANCE TO JACKY.

as Robert Macaire, and he had no black patch over his eye; but yet he was a little like the Macaire that Fechter gave us. Henry Irving's wonderful performance in a play called "Hunted Down" would give you some idea of him; but either Henry Irving or Henry Neville would easily realize the character.

What had he been? Not all his life a jail bird, that was very certain.

Had he ever been a gentleman? That was doubtful. He might have been well-born; but he had been a scamp, and the companion of scamps, his life through nearly. It was difficult to think otherwise. Unless, indeed, he had had some great sorrow some time, and that had suddenly changed the whole nature of the man.

A sudden sorrow. What kind of sorrow? Had a woman's love—a woman's hate—anything to do with it? Why, what sorrows in the world are there worth calling sorrows in which there are not woman's love or woman's hate mixed up?

Had he been a soldier? He bore himself well, in spite of his burst boots, trodden down dismally at the heels, and turned up ridiculously at the toes. Yet, somehow, he hardly walked like a soldier. He turned out his toes too much.

Could it have been possible that he had ever been a dancing-master? Well, there are more impossible things in the world than that. For instance, the chance of his ever being rich enough to sell that little village up stick and stone—the chance of his ever being powerful enough for those living there to cringe to him and cry for mercy. Yet such things came to pass.

He little wotted of it, though, just now. One object in life had he. He was desperately hungry, and wanted a good dinner.

"I will dine," he said to himself—"yes, I will dine. I'll have one more right down good dinner on the cheap, and then I'll start an honest life fair and square on a full waistcoat."

Let us see how he did it.

STEP II.

You would have made a very great mistake indeed if you had supposed that East Hagglesford was a deserted village. Had our rogue but made acquaintance with it ten hours earlier in the day, he would have been not a little annoyed by the bustle and activity there prevailing.

There had been but one idea in the heads of the commercial portion of East Hagglesford ten hours ago, and that was that an uncommonly fine stroke of business was going to be made that day. And if you had asked the East Hagglesfordians why it had not been made, they would probably have told you that there had been a curse over the place, and that it had always been so.

There was a very considerable amount of grumbling going on all day long, and half through the night, in East Hagglesford. There was Miss Em Pember, the buxom hostess of the village inn (the sign represented a sad and solemn green dragon, seemingly breaking its heart at not being able to pick up a difficult step in the sailor's hornpipe)—there was Em Pember, as happy and well-looking a spinster as you would wish to see, who was one of the chief grumblers.

There was Mrs. Pegg, the groceress, a cosy, comfortable-looking widow (without incumbrances), who bewailed the day she was born, or that her mother was born before her.

There was Mr. Pidgeon, the village barber, a prey to the profoundest melancholy, who sighed as he whetted his razor, and fixed you with hollow eyes, full of dismal forebodings, as he felt the razor's edge.

That day there had been some steeple-chases just beyond West Hagglesford, distant about two miles from the picturesque village where my story opens. Between West Hagglesford and East Hagglesford the most bitter enmity existed. That is to say, the East was spitefully envious of the West; but the West, being twice as big, and six times as populous, did not trouble its head very much about the envy in question, but went comfortably on its own way, and made plenty of money.

The West Hagglesfordians always had all the luck. In the matter of the races it was just the same.

It was at West Hagglesford that Lady Challice lived in a great, grand house, with a great park, all brand new-built, and laid out and planted with young trees the year before her son, Charles Challice, came of age. At East Hagglesford was the old country-seat of the Challices which they had abandoned; a wonderful old, rambling house, full of pleasant associations of times long past, the wooden panel on the staircase still showing the hole the Cromwells' gun-shot tore in it when a forty-eight hour siege was maintained, and bravely resisted by a Royalist Challice over two hundred years ago.

Yet every room in that old house, and every one of the huge trees clustering round it, had its story. Hugh's father had been born, and had died there. The East Hagglesfordians shook their heads, and threw up their hands, when they heard that John Challice's widow was going to move away from it, and build a new house at West Hagglesford.

As far as she was concerned, her removal was no great loss, the villagers agreed, and the coming there of her sister no marked gain. One was proud and overbearing, but rich; the other poor and proud—a wretchedly unsatisfactory mixture.

The rich Mrs. Challice and her son now spent all their money at the detested place, two miles off, in all manner of frivolous gayeties—among others, some steeple-chases; and these must, of course, be held in the outskirts of West Hagglesford, although every living soul in East Hagglesford was of opinion that some meadows in the immediate vicinity of the latter place were much better suited for the purpose than the site which had been chosen.

However, there seemed just a ghost of a chance that the races, two miles distant, would bring custom to East Hagglesford that day; because, unless a new road that had been a long while in a half-finished state were completed in time, East Hagglesford would be on the high road.

Need it be said that, of course, the road was finished in a villainously slip-slop kind of style, and that everybody went by it, giving the poor old, doomed village the cold shoulder.

Had not things turned out thus, really good times were in store for the race-course company. Em Pember's brain had hatched a gigantic dinner scheme, and she had cooked some immense joints, drawing public notice to the important fact by a placard of her own penmanship, in which she spelt dinner with one n, in fine, bold, Roman characters.

The groceress had also pasted up a paper, half obscuring a legend set forth upon a small square of wood beneath, to this effect:

PROVISION STOREJEM

I M A P E G G

wherein it will be seen the artist miscalculated the space at his command, and tacking the first syllable of Jemima's name on to the description of her place of business, enshrouded the whole in mystery, so that persons who saw it for the first time took it to be "someout foreign."

On her bit of paper Mrs. Pegg inscribed a promise of tea and cresses, which really ought to have had a pleasant sound to weary way-farers. But perhaps, Mr. Pidgeon, the barber, had soared highest, to fall farthest, and get the biggest bump.

He it was who had conceived the grand notion of an Oriental Saloon, for the sale of ginger beer—(after all, it wants a noble mind to grasp greatness); and he went in wildly for a whole gross, making and corking it himself—a labor which took close upon a fortnight, during which he cut down the hours for his regular business, and dismissed customers in the shaving and hair-cutting lines if they turned up *mal a propos*.

The only drawback to all this, as I have before stated, was, that the traffic went the other way (the new road), and missed East Hagglesford altogether.

Thus it came to pass that just one hour before the ragged rogue arrived upon the scene, the heart of commercial East Hagglesford was sad and heavy, and bitter discontent prevailed.

Perhaps the general sense of injury attained its climax, when a far-off burst of cheering reached the ears of the poor barber, languishing on a bench in the inmost recess of his Oriental Saloon; and he, rushing madly forth, clambered on the stile, and found that the voices were those of the van-loads of holiday-makers, going home down the new road, hooraying vociferously.

And every one of these he could not help reflecting, might have partaken of a bottle of his ginger beer.

In the bitterness of his heart, therefore, Mr. Pidgeon burst out with all the strength of his lungs into—"Hooray! hooray! hooray!"

The voice brought out Miss Pember and Mrs. Pegg, both much astonished. Then Mr. Pidgeon descended from his perch, and gave one more feeble hooray in a most dismal tone of voice.

"Hooray, by all means," said Miss Pember snappishly; "but, for my part, I don't happen to see anything to hooray about. I'm glad Mr. Pidgeon does, though; ain't you, Mrs. Pegg?"

"Very!" answered Mrs. Pegg, shortly. "P'raps Mr. Pidgeon is like some other folks—he's very easily amused."

"That's true," rejoined Miss Pember; "and that's them that don't suffer for it, may be I've not been able, as yet, to see what particular good the steeple-chases have done to East Hagglesford. They've brought down a lot of nasty, low riff-raff, that I'll allow; but they won't put a penny piece into any honest, hard-working body's pocket."

"There was never a truer word spoken than that, Miss Pember. It's precious little good anything got up by them Challices does us. Oh, dear, no! We're not the new town, we're not. It was Mr. Pidgeon's idea, if I'm not very wrong, that we should do something, wasn't it? I hope you will find your ginger beer go off, Mr. Pidgeon, according to your expectations."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pegg," said the barber, much hurt. "I dare say they will go off pretty well."

At that instant, two bottles did go off all by themselves—a feat several other badly-corked bottles had performed before then, during the day; and while Pidgeon ran away to look after his damaged stock, the two ladies laughed loudly at his misfortune.

They, however, had not quite had out their grumble yet, but returned to the inn bar-parlor to continue it.

"There's too much steeple-chasing and horse-racing about that young Charles Challice, in my opinion, Miss Pember," said Mrs. Pegg, sitting down, the better to enjoy a glass of something comforting. "He'll go to the dogs if my lady does not watch him closely. Yet his father had all the virtues, if you are to believe his tombstone in the churchyard."

"It's very well, Mrs. Pegg, to talk about training up a child in the way it should go. Fine ladies haven't the time. You must hold the reins yourself, it seems to me, if the cart is to keep out of the ruts."

"My fine madam's nephew did not keep out of the ruts, if report speaks truly, did he? They say it was nothing but his wildness and extravagance that has made Mrs. Challice's sister-in-law as poor as she is."

"A selfish, cruel young wretch! I believe it's too true; and see them now. The daughter is just home from board-school, if you please, where she's been brought up a fine lady, learnt music and French, and such like useless faldrials! And what's her prospects, I should like to know?"

"Perhaps she will go out for a governess or upper

servant, after all. I should be surprised at nothing in our county gentry—no, not if they were to come down at last on us other poor folks with a subscription to keep them from going into the House! Something respectable, perhaps,—a one and three naughts, eh?"

"If they do, then, they'll have to put me down for one of the naughts. That's all I'll help them with."

As may be judged by the foregoing dialogue, the county gentry were not held in high esteem by the East Hagglesfordians at any time; but just now the two ladies talking were both very tired, and hot, and angry.

It was surely the worst possible time for our ragged rogue to choose for the perpetration of the little robbery he meditated. Yet just now, at this critical moment, he came strolling down the road, scanning the preparations for his entertainment with much complacency.

Misguided rogue!

STEP III.

Mr. Pidgeon was the first to notice the advent of the shabby stranger, and he contemplated him critically.

It seemed to Mr. Pidgeon that he might possibly be equal, in a pecuniary sense, to a penny bottle of the famous ginger beer, but that if he stopped a long while lounging about all over the Oriental Saloon whilst drinking it, his custom would bring no credit upon the establishment in the opinion of problematical passers-by some time hence.

One thing was very certain. A person of his dissipated appearance was not at all like to care for wishy-washy tea; and as to dinner, the thing was very clearly quite out of the question.

How often the cleverest of us are out in our calculations!

The ragged rogue passed the tea and cresses by contemptuously, it is true; but he never even looked at the Oriental Saloon. On the contrary, he walked straight towards the inn, and flung himself carelessly down in a chair set in front of a table, on which a white cloth had been very carefully spread since ten o'clock in the morning.

Miss Pember and Mrs. Pegg coming forth from the hostel just at that moment, the ladies eyed the stranger with some suspicion; and, whilst the latter retreated to her grocery store, the former approached him with a little toss of the head, and, pointing to some benches at a little distance, said, "Will you please to sit there? This table is for dinner."

"I should like to dine," remarked the shabby man, "if you have no objection."

"The charge for dinner," said Miss Pember, curbing her impatience, "is half a crown; and for that you can have a choice of joints, and eat as much as you like. Dine for to-morrow and next day, too, if you choose."

"I shall have to make up for yesterday and to-day before I begin," the rogue reflected; but he only signified his approval of the proposed arrangements by a bland smile and a bow of the head.

Miss Pember was puzzled. Her customer was not at all the kind of person she had expected, yet it would not do to offend him if he really had the money in his pocket—and it most likely would disgust him if she asked him to pay in advance.

"I don't at all like the man," she thought, to herself. "But then, surely, no one with such a hat would ever have the impudence to order a dinner he could not pay for! Perhaps his shabbiness is eccentricity. One never knows. These sporting men are so peculiar."

Satisfying herself with this conclusion, Miss Pember bustled about; for, with the exception of an old woman-servant, she was alone in the house—the pot-boy ostler having quarreled with her early in the morning, and left for the races. She therefore brought out the dinner herself; and her customer's eyes wandered alternately, with evident approval, from her neat figure to the noble sirloin of cold roast beef, and back again to her cap and ribbons, and pretty pink and white face.

"Who keeps this tavern?" he asked, as he cut himself a huge slice. "You've an easy time of it, my dear, I should think, if it's often as quiet as this?"

"I keep it myself," she answered, tossing the cap and ribbons slightly. "You've been to the races, I suppose? Been lucky to-day?"

"I'm lucky to have so charming a hostess, and such uncommonly good beef," he answered, with his mouth full. "Will you give me a pint of your best ale?"

She brought it, and poured out a glass.

"How it sparkles!" he said enthusiastically; "you've left the light of your eyes in it, for certain."

"After all, he has the manners and the language of a gentleman," thought Miss Pember, whilst she blushed.

"Will you take some sweets, sir—some cherry-pie?"

"A little cherry-pie will just suit me," he replied—"and a taste of cheese, perhaps; and then I shall get on very nicely. By the way, now, have you a bottle of port wine in the house that you can recommend?"

"Port wine!" thought Miss Pember. "He is a gentleman, that's quite certain!" And she hastened to execute the order, whilst the shabby one put the pastry out of sight with the same celerity with which he had disposed of the roast beef. When she returned, he was lolling back in his chair, with a countenance indicative of extreme satisfaction.

"This seems to be a sleepy sort of village you've got here. Not much of it, and I should say uncommonly select."

"It's large enough to starve in, sir," replied Miss Pember. "That's what most of the folks do."

"Do they, now?" retorted her customer, with his mouth full of bread and cheese. "I ought to think myself lucky, then, so far. Trade bad, eh?"

"About as bad as it can be, I assure you. Why, sir, you're the first diner I've had to-day. Would you believe that?"

The rogue suspended his hand, in the act of cutting another slice of cheese, and suffered momentarily from a twinge of conscience.

"If she only knew," he thought. "I wonder how far my little capital would go towards the expenses? An uncommonly good glass of wine," he observed, aloud.

"There's no one to drink wine down in these parts!" said Miss Pember, with a sneer. "A pack of ginger-bread gentry, with long pedigrees, and twopence-half-penny in their pockets!"

"That's worse than me by twopence," he thought. "You're quite right, ma'am," he said. "I can't stand paupers with long pedigrees, myself. They're like potato plants, I've heard it said; the only good belonging to them's underground."

"You may well say that," observed Miss Pember, with an approving smile. "You'd think very little of our gentry if you knew them. You're a stranger down here. From London, perhaps?"

"Yes; from London, and other places. Traveling, to see life and character, without any fuss about appearances."

The landlady went on, without pausing to criticise this statement.

"There's our lord of the manor, Mr. Charles Challice. He never spends a shilling in East Hagglesford. Indeed, if half what is said is true, he's squandering most of his fortune away on the race-courses, while his mother spends the other half keeping up a fine house and a pack of idle, over-fed servants. Then there's the poor Mrs. Challice, as we call her, who lives, or starves down there at The Grange, keeping up a kind of state and appearance, according to what I'm told, that would make you well-nigh die of laughing if you could only see it. Wax candles set upon the table, and can't afford to light them! Silver dishes, and sprats for supper; and her daughter, Miss Harriet, if you please, brought up to the same silly sham, educated at a fashionable Chiswick boarding-school, taught French, and music, and dancing! Ar'n't you well, sir? It's the pie, p'raps?"

"All right! It's nothing! You said Miss Harriet Challice, did not you?"

"I did not say any more than Miss Harriet; but her name's Challice, of course, like her mother's. There's Challices and Challices down here; the country's full of them, and the church-yard, too! You don't know these parts?"

"No. I had no idea that she—I mean that they lived here. I heard the name on the race-course, I fancied, but was not sure. It is not a very common name in other parts of the country."

"It's common enough here, though," said Miss Pember. "That's the old Grange, where she and her mother live—that tumble-down old red brick house you see half-way down the hill-side, peeping through the trees. The young lady only came back from school yesterday. She's pretty enough, for those who like that pale, pasty-faced kind of woman! Is that your taste, sir?"

"Yes—no."

He was no longer listening to what she said. He had risen from his seat, and, mounted on a bench, was staring hard in the direction in which she had pointed. Miss Pember had thus a better opportunity of getting a sight of her customer's personal appearance; and if she had at first doubted him on account of his hat, she ought to have doubted him much more now the whole of his miserable wardrobe, and more especially his deplorable boots, were fully exposed to view. It was not a wise thing of him to stand up there exhibiting his rags and tatters in the broad light of day.

But he was thinking no longer of the small trickery and cunning of a rogue's life. A chance-spoken word had brought back to him the memory of a time he had almost deceived himself into believing that he had for ever forgotten.

"What brought me here?" he murmured, between his set teeth. "What curse was on me when I set my face this way? I must go at once."

But that was far easier said than done, whilst Miss Em Pember, brimful of uneasiness and distrust, stood looking at him.

He passed his hand across his forehead, on which large beads of perspiration had burst forth, and, with a mighty effort, dropping back into something of his old free-and-easy style, asked for one of Miss Pember's choicest cigars.

"A good one, please; and when I've finished my wine, and had a smoke, I'd like to pay, for I must be getting off."

Had Miss Pember thought of it, she might have suggested that smoking would spoil the taste of the fine old port she had just served him with, and thus, if her eccentric customer were already a bankrupt, she might at least have saved one sixpence. However, she went silently to execute his order.

Now or never—then was the time to escape. Mr. Pidgeon was deep in the recesses of his Oriental Saloon; Mrs. Pegg was drinking her own tea and eating her own crumpets, in desperation, in her own back parlor; the coast was seemingly quite clear, and Miss Pember would be absent for another minute or two.

He was active and swift of foot. Half a dozen strides would bring him to the stile. He would be down the field and through the thicket beyond in two minutes.

This project was no sooner conceived than he began to put it into execution. He cast a hasty glance towards the inn door, and made a stride in the direction of the stile. Then he came to a sudden standstill at the sight of two ladies, who, having noiselessly emerged from the short avenue leading to The Grange, were now within a few feet of the spot where he stood.

As though a pistol-shot had struck him, he staggered back; and rather falling into than seating himself upon a bench at a short distance from the table whereon he had dined, he sat staring at the youngest lady as though she were a ghost.

And, in truth, no apparition from the other world thus suddenly appearing could have frightened him more.

STEP IV.

MEANWHILE, the two ladies, all unconscious of the sensation which the sight of one of them had created, walked towards the stile, on which the youngest leant—a slim, pale, graceful girl, dressed in mourning, with large eyes, that fixed themselves upon the far distance, dreamily—rather an unhappy face for one so young, but without the discontented, half peevish look that the elder lady almost always wore.

There was evidently more of pain than pleasure in the daily life of Mrs. and Miss Challice at The Grange. The younger lady, coming fresh from school, at which she had passed all her holidays for the last three years, had perhaps been shocked to find her mother so changed, her home so altered. Perhaps she had expressed her thoughts in words, for the elder lady now spoke querulously, as though in answer to something that had been said.

"Things are not as they used to be, Harriet," she said; "and I have partly told you why. I may tell you all, some day, if the trouble cannot be got over, and the worst comes. But there's plenty of time for that."

"But, mother," said the girl, anxiously, "why not do so now? Can I be of no help to you?"

"Every help, perhaps, if you are not an obstinate fool!"

"Mamma, what a thing to say! Have I ever disobeyed you in anything?"—and the tears rose to the young girl's eyes. "Oh, how unlike all this is to what I expected to find!"

"All what?" retorted the old lady, peevishly; and then, adopting a coaxing tone, as she saw that her daughter was crying—"There, there!" she said; "you are a good girl, of course. Yes, yes, my dear!—yes, yes! Don't make a scene, for heaven's sake! Some of these village people may see us. Who is that man who is staring so, I wonder?"

The young lady dried her tears hastily, and looked at the ragged stranger wistfully.

"He is very poor, perhaps, and I also hungry, and too proud to beg—like us, mamma. Shall I give him the few pence I have here?"

"We have no pence to waste, Harriet. Do nothing of the kind. He is an idle, worthless fellow, I am sure. Come, now, let us go on. We shall be too late to meet your cousin coming back from the race. Come along; and, pray, do not cry any more, and make a fright of yourself—the very first time you meet him, too!"

The elder lady moved forward, saying this, and the younger followed her a short distance, then turned, came quickly back, and approached the rogue, holding sixpence between her fingers.

She looked at him quickly and nervously. "Are you in want?" she said.

"N-no," he answered, in a low tone, gazing intently at her.

"Have we not met before? I seem to know you."

"N-no."

"Take this, please; I am sure you"—

She did not finish her sentence; but thrust the money upon him, and retreated hastily in some confusion. He stood silent and motionless, his eyes resting on the little silver coin—a worn sixpence it was—a "lucky" one, with a hole in it—for full a minute, and then his breast began to heave, and his eyes filled with unbidden tears; and all in a tremble, and weak as a child, he sank back into the seat he had risen from to meet her as she approached.

"She had forgotten me!" he said. "I am glad of that!"

Miss Em Pember came out now with the cigar and the bill, an elaborate combination of illegible hieroglyphics and incorrect arithmetic.

"Thank you," he said—"that's right; I'll pay you in a minute."

He did not notice that Miss Em Pember's face wore anything but a complacent expression, but rather distrustfully ran over the various dilapidations in his poor, worn-out wardrobe; nor did he see that, instead of returning to the inn, she kept close at hand, also beckoning to Mr. Pidgeon, whose head at that moment appeared at the shop door, to come and speak to her.

Neither did he see that a party of heavy-looking, half-tipsy rustics, evidently returning from the races, were slouching up the village street, and others, a little further off in the meadows, approaching the stile, on which he had, a while ago, sat and rested himself.

No; he had no thought for anything that was passing around him. Listlessly he crumbled up the unpaid bill, puffed unconsciously the unlit cigar between his teeth, and peered into vacancy.

He was far enough away from East Hagglesford and its petty cares and strifes. He was two years younger—only two years younger—but what a change there was in him since then! He was not then rich, but he had no occasion to turn cheat to get a good meal. Only two years ago, but what an alteration!

Had he spoken his thoughts aloud, he might have said something like this: "I am rejoiced she has forgotten me—quite forgotten me—but, oh, how well I know her! It is the same sweet face, but looking sadder now, that turned my head then—two years ago; and it was just now—when she stood here—as it was then, so close to me, and yet so far away! She could not now read the heart of the poor, ragged outcast, whose hungry eyes were following her so longingly; so, in the old time, she never wasted a thought upon the presumptuous fool who sacrificed his life for the love of her!"

"Well, she has clean forgotten me; I am glad of that!"

"But why have I not forgotten her? How the dear

old days come back to me! I can see now quite plainly the old school-room looking out upon the garden. There are the young girls sitting under the shadows of the trees. There I, a poor penniless nobody, with my pitiful, my disgraceful, ape-like trade of dancing-master! There, too, is the lynx-eyed governess who found my secret out! Is she alive now, I wonder, still carrying on her old trade of toady and sneak? How I loathe her memory!

"And there, there, the center of the group, with her young, beautiful countenance turned away—so beautiful, I thought it, and think it still; so musical a voice I thought it, and think it still! I am a worse fool now than then!"

"It seems like yesterday, and yet an age ago, that dear old, unhappy life—the hopes, and fears, and foolish longings for what could never be! Then the half-spoken word, the intercepted letter, the scorn, the expulsion, the disgrace! The hard, honest work of years shattered at a blow, and all the world against me, and me a rogue and a vagabond! A pretty end to an illusive dream! Yet I am dreaming still!"

"Oh, what curse was on me when I came here? But the world is wide enough! I will go away again! I shall forget her easily enough, as I have done! I will not stay another instant in this hateful place! I—How about this dinner?"

"Did you call, sir?" asked Miss Pember. "You were looking for something, were you not?"

The rogue hung his head. He had no courage left. He faltered, but could find no words.

"I gave you the bill just now. Shall I take for what you've had?"

Oh, miserable, shame and degradation! Was there any hole or corner the conscience-stricken wretch could creep into? He at that moment felt the deepest contempt for himself, and the paltry fraud he had perpetrated, that ever living creature was capable of feeling.

And why was that? A while ago he would have laughed at the bare idea of any one entertaining such a sentiment. He would have felt no fear of the danger of his situation should things have turned out awkwardly.

But all his courage was clean gone now—all his powers of knavery at an end. He would willingly, at that moment, have signed away a year of his life, if any one would, in exchange, have discharged the dinner bill.

"Now, if you please," said Miss Pember; "I'm waiting."

"I am very sorry, but"—

Miss Pember flushed crimson, and she raised her voice to a shrill pitch.

"I don't know whether you're sorry or whether you're not, but I want to see the color of your money. You've eaten and you've drank of the best. Please to pay—that's all I ask!"

Several of the inhabitants of the village returned from the races, had reached the spot now, and gathered round.

"Can I speak to you privately?" the rogue said.

"No!" Miss Pember retorted. "We've no secrets between us, that I know of! I want payment for what you've had, that's all!"

"I have no money," he gasped.

"No money!" screamed the landlady. "You swindling vagabond! But I'll show you there's ways of treating such as you in these parts, that you mayn't know of in the place you come from."

"My good lady, pray don't be violent! I will pay you all right if you let me owe it you for an hour. You are, of course, aware that legally, it is only a common debt!"

"We don't want any splitting of straws here—do we, Mrs. Pember?" put in Pidgeon. "If he don't pay up at once, we'd best see if we can't learn him a lesson!"

"Thou'rt reet there, Master Barber!" chimed in a bystander; "and send him to school in the horse-pond to learn it!"

An approving shout greeted this proposition, and another man joined in with, "Duck him, lads! He's one of them welshing chaps from Lon'on, he is! See him with the thimble-riggers mysen at t' races—him as Master Goodman lost a pound to. Let's duck him, I say!"

The rogue sprang to his feet and cleared a space round him with a sweep of his right arm.

He did not look much like a coward now, or one easily to be ill-treated.

But the country folks were no cowards either; and what was more, several of them had drank copious potations of strong ale. Two rushed on him, and his fists flew out like lightning, rolling them over in the dust.

"Take care!" he cried, fiercely. "I'll make short work of some of you, if you lay a hand on me!"

But the blood of the others was up, and heeding not the warning, they rushed upon him again in a body. He fought, it is true, with the fury of a mad bull; but what could he do against so many? In three minutes they laid him low; they dragged him, torn and bleeding, and covered with dirt, towards the stagnant pond in The Grange road; some of his tormentors roaring with laughter, some gasping for breath, and swearing with rage.

Alike to his cries for mercy, mixed with savage curses and vows of vengeance, they paid no attention. He was now quite powerless in their hands—his strength spent—an almost indistinguishable mass of rags and tatters writhing feebly.

What curse had been on him when he came there; and what miserable shame and degradation to suffer before her!

For she was there, sure enough. In all the wild confusion, and through the fierce struggle, he had seen her and her mother standing on the outskirts of the crowd.

He saw her now, as, hoarse with shouting, wholly helpless, they dragged him away in triumph.

THE SECOND FIGURE.

IN WHICH ANOTHER WOLF COMES PROWLING.

STEP I.—EXIT FIRST WOLF.

" II.—ENTER SECOND WOLF.

" III.—THE SECOND WOLF AT WORK.

" IV.—EXIT SECOND WOLF.

STEP I.

MISS HARRIET CHALLICE had not stood by a silent spectator of this violent scene. She was no poor, flimsy, rice-paper heroine, as we shall presently see.

She saw the poor wretch, powerless and bleeding, in the hands of a score of strong men; and her sympathies, like those of every true woman, went without a moment's reflection, on the side of the weak.

She recognized, in the glimpse she got of him, disfigured though he was by the struggle, that he was the man on whom she had bestowed her charity a short time before, and, freeing herself from her mother's grasp upon her arm, she ran swiftly towards Em Pember, and asked what was the matter—what the man had done?

"I hope they won't be too rough to the fellow," Em said, with an uneasy consciousness that she was speaking rather late in the day.

"No, no—they must not do it!" Miss Harriet exclaimed. "How dare they?—are there no police?"

"Well, as to the police," said the landlady, hesitating in her merciful intentions as the recollection of her wrongs returned to her,—"eighteen shillings clean gone, and with such cool impudence, too! If the constable had been anywhere where he could have been got at, which he never is!"

"Did the man steal the money?"

"He stole the money's worth. With all the effrontery in the world, he ordered a dinner fit for the Lord Mayor, and then had no money to pay!"

"And it was only for that! You must stop them! Call—call as loud as you can! You shall not lose a penny, I promise you that. I would pay you now, but I have not the money in my pocket! But I will pay you, I promise you! My name is Challice! That is my mama coming this way! You know her!"

"Harriet, Harriet! What is all this?" the old lady asked, in an injured tone.

"Don't tell!" Miss Harriet said, hastily, to the landlady; "but do what I say! Quick, quick! They will kill him, I am sure they will! Those cruel wretches!" she exclaimed to her mother. "Do you see? The cowards—the cowards—I would have them all whipped to death!"

"Harriet! for goodness sake," her mother expostulated, "do not speak so loud. We are unpopular enough here as it is, and I'm sure I do all in my power to conciliate them. Let them do what they like. What does it matter? We have surely troubles enough of our own, without concerning ourselves with those of every ragged vagabond!"

But Harriet was not listening to these remarks. She was eagerly following with her eyes the movements of Em Pember, who was now most energetically entreating the mob to abstain from further violence—assuring them at the same time, vehemently assuring them, that it was all a mistake, and her bill had been paid.

"Whether you're paid or not," one man cried, with a savage laugh, "he must be ducked for his welshing at the races, if he's not for anything else. Here, lads, bring him on this way! We'll swim him in the mill-stream; there's more room there, and we'll have better sport."

Some one had fetched a rope, which was passed with a slip-knot over his head, and pulled tightly under his chest, holding down his arms. Then, half lifeless, he was raised upon the parapet, and pitched into the water.

The case of this luckless rogue seemed desperate indeed, unless help were straightway sent to save him. But just as the waters closed over the victim's head, a party of horsemen rounded the corner of the village street, coming up the road that led to the race-course; and seeing that something of an exciting nature was taking place at the bridge, came forward at a more rapid pace.

"Harriet, Harriet!" exclaimed Mrs. Challice; "that is your cousin, the one in front. For goodness sake, put your hat straight; and how you've burst your glove, and how hot and red you are!"

Strange to say, without pausing to attend to any of these matters, Miss Harriet signed to the foremost horseman to stop, and, in a few breathless words, entreated him to rescue the culprit from his tormentors.

"You are my cousin Charles! I am Harriet Challice! I have no time to speak to you now! Those wretches are killing that man! You must stop them! They will listen to you! If not, beat them with your whip—trample them under foot!"

The person addressed was a tall, powerful young man, with broad shoulders, flaxen hair, and a sun-burnt face—not too wise-looking, perhaps, but certainly handsome, according to the ordinary acceptation of the term.

He seemed not a little surprised and puzzled by the somewhat startling speech addressed to him, and he smiled and opened his eyes; but he wasted no time in pausing to consider, spurred on his horse, and galloping into the crowd, shouted to the ringleaders to desist from their sport.

It was possible that had Mr. Charles Challice been unknown to them, he might have failed in his purpose, and that he and his party, another gentleman and two grooms, might even have been roughly handled; but, at the sight of his face, one in the crowd called out,

"Here's the young Squire! Drop it now, lads; there's been enough of this!"

But one or two, however, were for questioning the young Squire's right to interfere.

"He's got to do with them that's brought before him in the Court-house—not here."

"We're justices here! Who's to stop us?"

"Well," said Mr. Challice, "I mean to stop you, either by fair words or otherwise; and there are some here that'll be on my side. Come, let the man go; and split this crown-piece among you, over there, at the 'Green Dragon.'"

The five shillings settled the matter, and paid the rogue's ransom. Released from his perilous position—for, during the parley, he had been suspended about a foot from the surface of the water, twirling ignobly round and round, like a trussed fowl roasting at the end of a string—the poor man's "Jack"—he now stood in the midst, a deplorable object, his clothes torn from his back, and such sad rags as yet covered him, soaked through, and clinging to his body. One of the old burst boots he had lost altogether, and one of his white cuffs, with a trashy brass stud in it still, hung upon the wrist of an arm from which the sleeve had been torn from the elbow, disclosing the fact that the cuff and collar composed the whole stock of linen that the shabby stranger had worn.

"I don't know what you have been guilty of, man," said the Squire; "but if you will accept a well-meant piece of advice, you will get out of this as quickly as may be, and don't show yourself again for some time to come."

The half-drowned rat made as though he would speak, but his voice failed him; and without saying a word, he slunk away, leaving a thin trail of water on the dusty road, which showed for some thirty or forty yards what direction he had taken, and then was lost in the grass on the road side.

STEP II.

HAVING played his part of gallant defender, Mr. Charles Challice now returned to the place where the ladies were waiting, and, alighting from his horse, gave it to his groom.

The elderly lady was profuse in her apologies.

"I don't know whatever you can think of Harriet! She is so impetuous, so self-willed! Although you are first cousins, a little more ceremony surely was necessary!"

"I don't know, aunt!" he answered, laughing. "I think not. There was hardly time."

"We should have let the man be drowned while we were making pretty speeches," the girl said, half laughing; "and we can make them now instead, if necessary."

"Yes; oh, yes, to be sure!" Charles Challice answered, blushing as he spoke. He was slow and sure, and did not exactly follow some of this. His cousin was quite a novelty in the girl way, according to his experience—a novelty, though, which he thought he rather liked, but had not quite made up his mind yet upon the point. Presently he would be able to think it over; and, in the meanwhile, to hide some small amount of confusion he suffered from, he hastened to introduce his friend.

He, Captain Everest, was some eight years Challice's senior. They were both in the same regiment, but Challice was yet quite fresh at his soldiering; his uniform was hardly creased, and there were no scratches on his sword. The other had been on active service, and had smelt powder. Hot suns had bronzed his features, which wore a somewhat weary air.

Most ladies felt from the first a great interest in Captain Everest, which was, however, a sentiment he only half returned. It was most unusual for him to manifest any desire to make new acquaintances. Challice said afterwards, "I never knew you talk so much, Jack! What on earth were you saying?"

"I don't remember saying anything worth repeating," Everest replied.

Challice would himself have liked to talk to his new-found cousin, but the elder lady had prevented this by a masterly stroke of generalship, and possessed herself of the young Squire's arm. She was, in truth, fearful lest some outspoken word from the girl might mar his first impression of her.

As it was, she thought to herself, "What could he think of Harriet's strange, excited manner? So unlike what he must be used to in girls! But she is so unlike girls! It is very hard that it should be so! I don't know what I have done to deserve it! One child has well-nigh broken my heart, and now the other!—now the other!"

But she let little of this secret misery be seen in her manner, save that she was, perhaps, rather nervous and excited. Her life had, for some years past, been a weary struggle against heavy odds. There was in her look, one might have fancied, a kind of dread expectation of something coming, which was visible when she was first introduced to strangers. The rich Mrs. Challice, at the Hall, thought that her late brother-in-law's widow was a little mad, or very eccentric. The death of a much-loved son had probably affected her brain.

She was now making a score of excuses for the non-appearance of herself and her daughter at the races. "Harriet was so tired after a journey home yesterday, and had a bad headache. Besides, she had nothing prepared to go in. Dear Charles, you know what girls are at her age—what mountains they make out of mole-hills in such matters! Poor thing, too! I know she is disappointed!"

"My mother wished me to ride round this way, and ask you to dine with us to-night. Will you come?"

"My dear Charles, how kind of you! I thought you might come; but I am so sorry! It will be too late, won't it? It will be impossible! I am so sorry!"

"Why impossible?" Challice asked, much surprised. "It will not take half an hour to get there, and we do not dine till half-past eight. You must come."

"I should be so glad to do so, for my dear child's sake—she has seen so little, shut up at school all these years—but, you see, my coachman is not at home."

"My groom can drive you; he is the steadiest fellow alive."

"No, no; I'm afraid not. Everything is so unfortunate! Edwards has taken the horse away with him."

"But, my dear aunt, here is the groom's horse. She will run in harness, and take you as quiet as a lamb. I believe you do not want to come!"

"What an idea, Charles!" the old lady said, evidently racking her brains in search of some fresh obstacle. "But I am so sorry; and, the fact is, I am engaged!"

"Engaged!" he repeated, rather incredulously; for this excuse seemed to come oddly after the others.

She did not notice it, and rambled on.

"I have all day been expecting my man of business from London; and I must be in to see him, for he is sure to come. Ah! that is he!"

There, sure enough, at the turn of the road, was the man of business in question—or, at any rate, a person who had the appearance of being a man of business—an elderly individual, short-necked, and rather over-stout and over-rosy, with nothing of at all an alarming look about him; yet, most certainly, the old lady, at the sight of him in the distance, turned deadly pale beneath her rouge, and the hand resting on Challice's arm shook as with palsy.

But Charles Challice was not very quick at seeing some things; and just now he had an idea in his head which was quite large enough to fill it.

"See here, aunt," he said, "if you have really business to attend to, let me take back my cousin with me. I will take the greatest possible care of her, and my mother will drive her over here again in the morning. We have a dance. I think she will enjoy herself."

Had the proposition been made a few minutes earlier, most likely it would have been met with a score of excuses. As it was, she seemed, somehow, scarcely to understand the words that were being spoken, and briefly gave her consent; then hastily disengaging herself from her nephew, bade him and the others goodbye.

Harriet, who had not heard what was taking place, looked at her mother in astonishment, until Challice explained.

"Oh, you dear mamma, how kind of you!" she cried.

"May I really go?"

"Yes, dear—yes; and make haste. You must not keep your cousin waiting."

They were now in front of The Grange, and the young lady ran forward, in a flutter of delight.

"You know your way to the stables, Charles," the old lady said, in a tone which seemed to imply that he and his friend might go there, and leave her alone.

When they had done so, she raised her hand, and beckoned to the man of business, who had stood silent where she had at first seen him, a few yards distant, and who now readily followed her into the house, and into a dark, dreary-looking, oak-paneled parlor, the door of which she closed behind them.

But Captain Everest had not followed his friend to the stable without casting a curious look towards the rosy-faced man, and the rosy-faced man's eyes followed him with seeming interest.

Perhaps they were wondering where they had met before; or perhaps they knew each other very well, but did not care to keep up the acquaintance out of business hours.

The Captain dropped his eyes, and the rosy man, whose name was Benson, stroked his chin with his gray lisle-thread glove, and very faintly smiled.

STEP III.

WITH the same anxious, excited manner on her, the old lady bade her man of business take a seat, and, going to a cupboard in the corner of the room, brought out a decanter, about a quarter full of sherry, and a very small wine-glass, which she filled with a trembling hand. By the side of this she placed a green desert-dish, containing half a dozen mixed biscuits of untempting appearance, having evidently been long cup-boarded.

Mr. Benson, pressed to partake of these luxuries, took a sip of the wine, and made a wryish face at it, but rejected the biscuits altogether. "What a lovely day we have had!" she said.

"I have been waiting an hour for you nearly," he replied, "out in that dusty road."

"Why did you not come in and sit down? The servant should have asked you."

"She didn't anyhow!"

An awkward pause followed this, which was broken by a tap at the door. Miss Harriet, in an incredibly short time, had dressed herself, and was ready to start.

The mother, with a confused apology to her visitor, came out into the passage. The girl looked very pretty just at that moment. Her eyes sparkled with pleasure; her ordinarily pale cheeks were slightly flushed. To tell the truth, half the dispatch shown in her toilet arrangements was due to the scantiness of her wardrobe, and she now wore the same dress in which she had been walking, with some trifling additions hastily added. It was a well-worn black silk, elegantly fashioned.

She looked very graceful and pretty in it, however; and only women would have noticed that it was not quite what a young lady's dress ought to be. Men would have noticed her figure only, and passed the frayed edges.

The mother hardly looked at her. She was feverishly anxious that she, and Challice, and the other gentleman, should go away.

"That's right!—that's right!" she said. "Are they bringing the carriage round? Yes, I hear them. You must be very careful, mind—very careful! Don't chatter about anything here! Don't let that woman—your aunt—draw you out; you understand? What a while they are! My poor head is splitting! Ah! here they come! Good-bye, Charles! good-bye, Captain! You'll take great of her! Good-bye, dear! Heaven bless you!"

Curiously enough, they noticed little or nothing of her excitement, and she waved her handkerchief until they had rounded the turn in the road. Then of a sudden she became curiously changed—grim and gray.

She entered the house, with a sigh, walking heavily. At the door of the room where Mr. Benson awaited her return, her manner changed again, however, and she entered with a smile.

"Now, sir," she said, "I am at your service."

"I am quite at yours, madam," replied the other, dryly. "I have been so some time."

"I cannot tell you how very sorry I am to have kept you; the more so as"—

"Well, time is money with me, Mrs. Challice. I suppose you get into the way of not being particular to an hour or two when you live in these world-and-kind of places. I have sometimes felt half inclined myself to give up my line, and go in for the buttercup business. Just as yet I can't afford it. I'm even very short—very short indeed. I should not have waited for you so long to-day if I had not been."

There was a tremor in her voice as she replied, "Oh, I am so sorry! I don't know what to say to you, Mr. Benson! I am not quite ready with the interest. I only want the delay of a few hours—an hour or two."

Mr. Benson, at the moment about to help himself to a pinch of snuff, shut the box-lid without taking the pinch, and looked aghast.

"Not ready with the interest?" said he. "Why, I clearly understood that I was to have the principal before now! You won't deny that you promised it to me?"

"Yes, yes; I promised it, I know," she replied, in great distress. "But I have been bitterly disappointed. I should have realized a large sum before now, but—but I have been deceived."

"Upon my word," said Mr. Benson, smiling blandly, "you ladies have a straightforward, off-hand way with you that there's no keeping time with! In a word, I expected your fifteen hundred pounds to-day, and I want it! Do you understand?"

She tried a playful tone—not very playful, though—it was so painfully artificial.

"I only understand that it is wholly impossible," she said. "You cannot get blood from a stone. You won't be too hard on me, Mr. Benson?"

"I'm never hard on anyone unless I positively can't help it," he replied; "and I hate unpleasantness. I'm not that sort, and you know me. But I must look after my interests. I can't rob my children."

"Come, come!" the old lady said, gaining heart a little. "You have no children; you told me so yourself! You told me you had not a relative in the world! Ah! if you had a child, you would not be so hard!"

"That's an unfair way of putting it, ma'am. I can't have my feelings worked upon when it's a matter of pounds, shillings, and pence. Why did your son borrow my money when he had no means of repaying me? What did an ensign in a line regiment want with a thousand pounds? Who did he suppose was going to pay it back for him if he didn't do so himself, and how could he pay? Do you call that honorable?"

"Who did you suppose was going to pay?"

"The gentleman who lent him his name was security enough for me. I did not place much reliance in your son's paper. I'd touched it before, and burnt my fingers."

"Would that you had kept your money!" she cried, bitterly.

"I wish I had," said he, tossing off the remainder of the sherry without reflection, and shaking his head after it, as though it had been the vilest tasted physic. "I wish I had, all things considered. I was too good-natured, and this is all the sympathy I get!"

"Sympathy!" she repeated.

"Why not? You take the clap-trap view of the question. Poor young man!—led away!—fatal facility!—scoundrel usurer!—tempting innocence!—and all that sort of thing. But you know very well our Ensign was no innocent lambkin, any more than three parts of the young profligates who haunt the money-lenders' offices."

"Perhaps so," the mother answered, angrily, the color rushing to her face. "In a word, what are your terms for a renewal?"

"Just double what you have been paying."

"Monstrous! It cannot be done!"

"Oh, very well, then!" said Mr. Benson, rising, and buttoning his coat across his chest; "give me my principal, ma'am. You can't expect that I shall go on like this. Besides, why not ask the gentleman himself—Mr. Challice, who lent his name to help you?"

"No, no; I cannot do that! I have told you again and again I cannot do that!"

"Yes, I know. You have told me that the reason you don't ask him is because he supposes the bill has been paid. Well, tell him it hasn't. He must be a very easy-going sort of young fellow, this Mr. Charles Challice, to lend his name to a fifteen hundred pound bill, and never trouble himself any more about it. I should have thought he would have wanted to have a sight of the old bill when it was paid."

She made no reply.

"Come, now, ma'am, take my advice, and put it to him at once. He'll settle for you, and let you owe it him without interest, or such small interest as I can't afford to take."

If the man was possessed of any heart, he must have felt for her, so evident were her sufferings. He had

"Well, there, now," he said, "I will leave it to you, and won't hurry for a little bit. But we must not talk about months, or weeks, but days. I must have my money—the fifteen hundred, mind, not the interest—and I'll give you three days—three clear days! I have got some business that will keep me in the neighborhood till Saturday—Saturday, then let it be! I'll make no suggestions—a woman's wit in these matters is better than a man's. Good evening, ma'am."

With these words he left her, and she sank back in her chair, and covered her worn face with her thin hands.

When, an hour later, the servant came to look for her, she found the traces of tears still wet upon her cheeks, and that they had made tiny water-courses among the rouge and powder.

"You want rest, my dear," the old woman said to her mistress. She had been in her service since the very first year of Mrs. Challice's married life, and knew most, perhaps quite, all her mistress's secrets.

As she spoke, she laid her hand gently on the lady's arm, and bent her head towards hers. "Come, come, my dear—don't cry! It breaks my heart to see you so!"

The lady looked up, and kissed the servant's cheek.

"Thank you, Martha," she said. "If you will lend me your arm, I think I should like to go out for a little while upon the terrace. The air in the house stifles me!"

Martha lent her arm without a word, and the two old women passed slowly out into the still night.

The moon had risen, and in its light, two broken statues—once ornamenting, now disfiguring, the old stone terrace overlooking the neglected garden below stood out ghostlike.

Struggling through the thickly interlaced branches of the huge elms, the moonlight fell there upon the ruined fountain, now half choked up with dead leaves and rubbish of former winters, the basin carpeted with moss and rank green weeds. What had once been a flower-garden was now a wild and rugged waste, where rotting branches of trees lay, half-strangled by creepers, across what had once been firm gravel paths.

It was a dreary, sorrowful scene at any time—drearier than ever now; speaking of happy times gone never to return, or wasted lives and blighted hopes; and speaking almost audibly, as it seemed to the feeble old lady clinging to her old friend's arm, and tottering almost painfully at her side.

Each, as a girl, knew that place years ago, when the garden-paths were well kept, before the weeds had overrun and crushed the flowers. And, as they stood there, the vision of a bright summer morning, and the mistress wearing a short-waisted white frock, a broad blue sash, and looking monstrously pretty, came by some strange coincidence—perhaps, not very strange, though, after all—to the minds of both.

"Do you remember, Martha, when I saw my poor, dear boy's father for the first time—here, on this terrace—you were with me?"

"I remember it quite well. I was this moment thinking of it!"

"Were you?" the other answered, and gently pressed her fingers upon the servant's arm. She could say no more for a while.

"I often think of it," she added, after a pause; "and of the time I saw my poor boy for the last time—that was here also."

"That was here also," the servant said.

"So the happiest and most wretched events in my life are associated with this place! I am glad to live here! I hoped to die here, too, in peace!"

"Why not? You are not yourself to-night, and you have let that man frighten you. You're very silly; I've told you so again and again! It is only to frighten you he does it! Besides, we shall pay him off, like all the rest, before long, never fear!"

"No, no, Martha! You do not know what you are saying! It is impossible to pay him! I have raised all the money I can—I have reached the end—and yet he presses me! I can do no more; and the shame and disgrace must fall on me at last!"

"Oh, it was a cruel—cruel thing! How could a son, who had been so loved by her, bring such misery on his mother? He deserved!"

The pressure of the hand tightened upon the servant's arm.

"You must not say that; it hurts me, for I love him still! We will go in to supper now, and afterwards walk a little again, if you are not tired. I shall perhaps be able to sleep then. It is such weary work to be awake, and count the hours till day comes again! Pray heaven, I sleep to-night!—pray heaven I sleep!"

STEP IV.

THE rosy-faced cause of so much misery walked slowly along the lane leading to the little village; and though it was not by any means a long walk, he sat down upon the stile where our rogue sat before, to rest himself. It was not by any means a hot night, for there was a soft, pleasant breeze which stirred the foliage overhead with a rippling murmur; but the rosy-faced man must have felt hot, for he thrust his fingers inside his blue satin stock, to ease its tightness.

"It's that messy wine, confound it," he said, "that's made me feel bad! I'll have a nip of brandy, and then get to business! It's growing late."

Mr. Benson's business, whatever it might have been, seemed to impart a certain amount of dolefulness to the countenances of his customers, several of whom, including the village barber, Mr. Pidgeon, he found, as it happened, in the "Green Dragon" parlor. A general shyness and uneasiness pervaded the little company there assembled when Mr. Benson showed his head, and the spasmodic smiles and nods which greeted him were followed suddenly by downcast looks and covert glances at next door neighbors.

Everyone felt it his duty to be as polite as possible to Mr. Benson, without letting anyone else see it. Everyone must have been very much ashamed of knowing Mr. Benson, and yet most particularly anxious to keep up his acquaintance.

Benson ought to have felt awkward under such circumstances, perhaps. He did not.

Undisturbed by the solemn silence that greeted him (Barber Pidgeon broke off in the middle of a story, the moment he saw the new comer, and neither he nor anybody else afterwards noticed that the story had not been concluded), quite undisturbed, Mr. Benson stood at the bar, and called for some brandy.

At the sound of his voice, Em Pember, who had her back turned towards the door, gave a start, let a pipe fall she was taking from the drawer to send to a customer in the parlor beyond. She served Mr. Benson herself, and as he gulped down the raw spirits, she said, in a low voice, "I thought you would have been earlier. I have the interest ready."

"What interest?" asked Mr. Benson, in a loud voice. "What do you mean? I said last time I would not renew."

"Hush, hush!" said Em Pember, in an agony. "Come to the corner, where they can't hear, and pray don't speak so loud!"

A tomb-like silence prevailed in the parlor. Pipes rested motionless within an inch of their smokers' lips and half-raised glasses were suspended in mid-air, cheeks flushed, jaws fell, and eyes rolled uneasily. Mr. Pidgeon placed his hand over the third and fourth buttons of his waistcoat, in the immediate neighborhood of which he felt a kind of "sinking."

An hour later you would hardly have recognized the same company. Mr. Benson was no longer there, and harmony prevailed in the place of silence and gloom; but was it only the hectic flush of gin and water that illuminated Mr. Pidgeon's cheek, and was old Josh Goodenough, the miller, only pot-valiant when he declared, with one of the roundest oaths a square-headed man ever swore, that he did not care a rap for all the dashed bill discounters in the dashed county, only there was less dash and more dreadfulness about the sentence as he spoke it?

Two hours later. Surely this could not have been the same village? Could that have been Pidgeon leading the roaring chorus, in which even Miss Em Pember joined approvingly in a low key from the distance? It would have done any worn, wayfarer's heart good, surely, to hear that cheery music, and see the warm, red light pouring through the drawn curtains on to the road without. In truth, it cheered the heart of at least one shivering, houseless wretch, until he recognized whence it came, and crept away again in terror, as we shall see.

But let them be jolly a moment or two, for goodness sake, now worthy Mr. Benson has turned his back on them. Yes, Mr. Benson had been; had interviewed his several customers; had threatened dire vengeance; had refused to listen to reason; had partaken of stimulants at the general expense, as it had been his wont to do on former visits; and at last with a pocket full of gold and notes, and a pocket-book full of renewed bills, had gone away, vowing next time to sell everybody up, as it had also been his wont to do ever since he paid his first visit to East Haggleford and discounted the first piece of Haggleford paper.

As usual, Mr. Benson had drunk hard, and, as usual, sworn harder, and driven a harder bargain; but he had gone. That was one good thing. The evil day had been tided over once more, and there was not a soul awake in East Haggleford who did not feel much jollier now it was all over for another three months.

Coming upon the scene of revelry, and knowing nothing of the little Benson episode, you would have said: "This surely is the happiest place in the world, and these the happiest men alive!" They had not even drunk too much yet, and quarreling had not begun.

Turning from the warm, welcoming glow of the red curtains, it would have been, however, a disagreeable surprise to rest your eyes upon the pinched, haggard face and shivering form already alluded to, which belonged, it must be owned, to a person one would have thought it about the most unlikely thing in the world to find there. It was indeed that shabby rascal who had been ducked from the bridge.

He had lost his way; he had wandered hours in the dark, up and down country lanes, and he had come back to the doleful village.

More dead than alive was he; and yet, when he got over his first disgust on finding out where he was, he grinned dismally, and muttered to himself, as he shivered and shook with cold, "What will they think I've come to steal now, I wonder? The horse-pond, perhaps."

He slunk away from the light, yet could not help casting a longing look towards it.

"I'm dying for a drop of drink," he murmured; "but it's more than my life would be worth to call for it. Here, I've my fourpence yet, and my double-headed half-penny, besides the sixpence she gave me; but I won't break into that; I'll keep that as long as I live—if I live out the night!"

The exercise he had taken had hitherto kept some small amount of warmth in his body, in spite of the saturated state of his garments; but now he was well-nigh wearied to death, and the night air seemed to cut him to the bone.

"It's bitter cold!" he murmured, hugging himself. "I shall die over this job! I dare say they'll find me in the morning in some dry ditch, or a barn or outhouse, if I've only the luck to get in one when morning comes, and wonder they can't wake me with a reminder from a hob-nail boot!"

A burst of laughter here smote jarringly upon his ear.

"They're merry enough over there!" he cried aloud. "They've a fiddler in there, and he's beginning a jig tune! Go on, my fine fellow! You're out of time, and tune, too; but it's good enough music for a poor shivering outcast to chatter his teeth by!"

"It's lucky, though, they don't know they've got me for an audience!" he added, presently. "They'd set the dogs at me, perhaps, or duck me again! Ah, yes, you may laugh, you empty-headed fools! I could laugh once, before—before I threw away my good name—my future—all—all, for—I wonder whether she is laughing! There's a light in a window of the house down there. I wonder whether that is hers!"

He mounted on the stile, and peered through the trees at it for a moment, then stepped down again, sighing heavily.

"I don't expect I shall last out this night," he said. "I feel mortal bad!"

Then he made up his mind to creep down the lane leading to The Grange, and find the warmest and most out-of-the-way corner, there to rest his bones till day-break, or till they found him, if he should sleep on soundly—which was, perhaps, the best thing he could do—forever.

"If I only knew whether my darling slept," he thought, "that I might lie down, like other faithful hounds have done before now, and die with my eyes fixed upon the window panes! May she be forgiven! she trod cruelly hard upon my heart; but the love's not all crushed out of it yet!"

A loud burst of laughter from the inn here again aroused him.

"Curse you all!" he growled between his teeth. "You'd shake without a joke to tickle you if you wore these wet rags!"

He had entered the lane, and got some yards down it, walking under the shadows of the trees, when, suddenly, the sound of a woman's voice brought him to a standstill. It was Harriet's mother speaking.

"You have given me till Saturday. What would you have now? I will be ready for you on Saturday, if—I possibly can."

"There must be no 'ifs,'" a thick voice answered, roughly. "We've had enough of ifs and buts. I want to bring this business to a crisis. Do you hear? I want the money I was swindled out of by your scoundrel son's forgery, and—"

"Silence!" cried another woman's voice. "Silence, fellow! Don't talk like that to my mistress, or—or old as I am, I'll drub the life out of you! Poor dear! poor dear! don't attend to a word he says! Come back to the house!"

She listened, and heard the sound of the woman's retreating footsteps, and then Benson's voice raised loudly as he worked himself up into a boiling passion.

"You proud pauper, I'll make you suffer for this! Let me tell you, the bill is out of my hands, and if the money is not forthcoming, will be presented to Charles Challice himself. I'll show you what it is to quarrel with me! I'll sell you up, and him up, too, if he doesn't pay! I'd sell the whole beggarly village for that matter; it's all mine, and I only let the beggars in it stay on till it suits me! Do you hear? I'll let them know! I'll let you know."

But there came a sudden pause here, then a strange, gurgling sound, and a heavy fall. After a time, all being still, the ragged rogue crept forward, under the shadow of the trees, and, twenty yards further on, came to something lying motionless in the moonlight, with a black, swollen face upturned to the sky.

"Gracious me!" cried the rogue, hastily bending over him, to press his hand upon his heart, and more hastily drawing back again after a brief and anxious interval. "He's died in a fit! What should I do? Help!"

But in a moment afterwards the thief repented of his rashness, and was down upon his knees rifling the dead man's pockets. He found directly a bulky pocket-book in his breast pocket, and some loose halfpence in his waistcoat. But, before he could continue in his search any further, he heard steps approaching rapidly, and, keeping in the shadow of the trees, stooped low and ran swiftly along, then paused and waited.

A minute or so later, Pidgeon, the barber, Good-enough, the miller, and one or two more, were on the spot.

"Bless me!" Pidgeon cried. "Here's a man down! Why, it's the money-lender, Benson!"

"He's been robbed! See—his waistcoat is undone!"

"He is dead! He has been robbed and killed!"

"No, no!" cried Pidgeon, eagerly. "See here! His pocket is crammed with banknotes and gold. He has not been robbed!"

The ragged rogue in the shade heard these words with a groan.

"That's like my luck!" he thought. "Why could not I have found that pocket full of gold, instead of this pocket-book full of waste paper?"

THE THIRD FIGURE.

IN WHICH IT IS A QUESTION WHETHER A THIRD WOLF EVER EXISTED.

STEP I.—THE MAN WHO HAD KILLED A MAN.

"II.—THE DOCTOR AND HIS STORY.

"III.—THE HAUNTED HOUSE IN WESTMINSTER.

STEP I.

THE rich Mrs. Challice was a very different kind of person to the poor Mrs. Challice.

The poor Mrs. Challice was thin and worn, and had a nervous way with her at all times. The rich Mrs. Challice was plump and pretty, with gentle eyes, and, perhaps, the sweetest smile you ever saw on a woman's face. Life had run smoothly with her, and her grief

for her dead husband had passed away, leaving but the tiniest wrinkles on her smooth, white brow.

Her poor relation was slightly bent with age, and she wore false hair, and false teeth, and rouged and powdered, and did artful things to her eye-brows with a smoked hair-pin. The rich Mrs. Challice's hair was silvery white, and nothing could well have set off the beauty of her fair skin to greater advantage. She was about three years the poor Mrs. Challice's senior, and looked quite three years younger than the other did. To-night, in her drawing-room, richly dressed, and with jewels brightly sparkling upon her bosom, you might have fancied she was thirty, instead of fifty, and as it was, she had still the heart of a young girl, warm and affectionate, and full of truthfulness in human goodness.

Truly, until now she had not had a great trouble, and nothing had happened to her to lessen her belief that the world was a good one, full of delightful things, made specially for rich people to enjoy, and inhabited by delightful persons, many to be mildly revered, as, for instance, some clergymen, and some dreadfully clever people; others to be laughed at, because they said funny things, or did funny things, or looked funny, and one, at least, to be loved—her son Charles.

"You are Harriet. I am so pleased to see you, my dear! Come and sit down by me, and tell me all about yourself."

These were the kind words which greeted the poor Mrs. Challice's daughter, as she timidly entered the large drawing-room alone, and they set her quite at her ease.

That was a night to be long afterwards remembered, when stormier times arrived, and the thunderbolt came crashing down, dealing destruction to all around. A fairy scene of beauty seemed to be spread before the young girl, so unaccustomed to anything of the kind. Something like this she had pictured to herself in her dreams; but these visions were more than realized, she thought. She had driven there in state in her mother's carriage, and though, it is true, the vehicle itself scarcely came up to what she had expected—for it was a damp, dismal, earthy-smelling conveyance, rather suggestive of hearses, with a doubt of rabbit-hutches and hen-roosts about it also; yet she had so much else to do, talking to her two cavaliers from either window as they rode along, she had hardly had time to look at the moth-eaten cushions, and notice that there was a spider's web with a great big spider in it in one corner of the roof.

Arrived at the Hall, everything was new, and strange, and grand, and delightful. It had been built recently, regardless of expense. It was of what architects call the "English Elizabethan" style—a picturesque jumble of gable ends full of large windows, some with stained-glass panes. The lower windows mostly opening on the lawn, where an artificial lake had been formed, and some great trees brought from the forest near at hand on some elaborate scientific plan, planted picturesquely upon its banks, and upon an island in the center; all looking as much at home, too, as though they had grown there from their earliest twighood.

Before the windows were a score of flower-beds, with choice flowers, massed together with exquisite taste, their perfume wafted upon the gentle summer breeze in at the open windows.

The interior of the Hall the girl thought to be a marvel of richness and beauty. Leading from the entrance-hall, in which life-sized oil-paintings hung right and left, was a wide marble staircase, and walking up which she felt like some errant shrimp, small and insignificant.

The bed-room she was conducted to upon her arrival was lofty and light. The room she and seven other girls slept in was not a third its size. She felt almost afraid when she saw her own little white, wistful face peeping, framed in mahogany, in the center of seven feet by four of the very best and thickest plate-glass.

When presently she left the sleeping-room, hearing the loud booming of a gong, which signified that the numerous company then staying at the Hall were expected to assemble in the drawing-room with as little delay as possible, previous to going to dinner, she heard the sounds of music, the soft *frou-frou* of silk, as ladies with long trains swept past and descended the stairs; and she crept down quite meanly, for hers was, as we know, a well-worn silk, and had but little rustle left in it.

The gentle-eyed, fair, smiling, rich Mrs. Challice had not a great deal of time to bestow on her on their first introduction, for several strangers were there that day who had to be looked after; and when the dinner was announced some seven minutes later, Harriet found herself seated alone, and, as she thought, for a moment, forgotten and deserted, for all the rest of the company were pairing off and passing from the room.

But it was not so. Somebody was standing over her—a very tall somebody; and, looking up, she saw Captain Everest's dark, handsome face.

He said something, she did not know what. She made a very vague reply, and then they were going together down the broad staircase, past grim and grizzly warriors, armed to the teeth, and doll-faced ladies with powdered wigs, black patches, dimpled smiles, and large fans, used for everything but to cool their fair owners.

The great dining-room below, with its profusion of oak carvings and rich draperies of chocolate color, heavily embroidered with gold, was lighted from the centre by swinging lamps, which shed a kind of halo on the hot-house flowers decorating it, and the glittering display of gold and silver dishes; whilst, behind, somewhere in the semi-gloom, dark forms moved noiselessly to and fro, and gently surprised you with a change of plate, or stealthily refilled your glasses.

How wonderful it all was, and yet the persons dining there for the most part seemed to take things as a matter of course, and not be at all frightened or astounded.

Around her was a buzz of almost constant conversa-

tion, lulled now and again for a moment or two when one single voice, when one subject and one speaker, monopolized general attention.

"So you have never been here before?" Captain Everest said, after a longish pause, in which they had eaten their soup. "It is a nice place, isn't it?"

"A beautiful place!"

"Yes, I think so. Perhaps a little too young yet, but it will get over that; and rather too large, but they want a largish room to put all these people in. Do you know any of them?"

"No. I have only come from school two days. Do they all live near here?"

"No. I think about twenty-one sleep here to-night. They come from all parts, and they are everything—even actors and authors."

"Tell me which is an actor."

"The one nearly opposite, sitting next to the vivacious young lady in blue—the one with the blue cheeks. He is Sylvester, the tragedian."

Harriet glanced at him eagerly, then asked for an author.

"The thin, frightened-looking little fellow farther to the right—that is Cholmondeley Watts. He writes three columns every day for a newspaper, besides novels and plays, and magazine articles, but he very rarely speaks. I never met a man who could amuse you more with his pen, or weary you more with his company."

"But who is that near the table, who speaks so rapidly, whom everybody seems to be listening to?"

"He's a distinguished literary amateur. He has an awfully clever book half-written, but has published nothing as yet. We expect great things of him!"

"There is another gentleman there who seems to be very impatient because they won't let him talk too."

"He has got his turn though, now, and he will most likely go on for some time to come. He is a member of Parliament—what is called a silent member; but he says a great deal away from the house, as a rule, and tells us what he is going to say next time he is there."

"And the others are?"

"All kinds of people. I should weary you if I catalogued them. Mrs. Challice gives the best dinners I have ever been at, and Charley Challice gets together the most wonderful company, who, on the whole, except the soldiers, are tolerably amusing."

"But you are a soldier!"

He laughed.

"Yes, I am a soldier. I don't think I am amusing, though."

"Yes, you are—that is, I mean no!"

"No, you're not, you were going to say. But bear with me. I'm like Watts—I don't talk—but I don't write like Watts; I wish I could."

"What do you do?"

"Nothing."

"But you have done lots of things. You have traveled a great deal. My cousin Charles said so as we were riding here. Where have you been?"

"To a good many places—to all parts of the Continent people go to and talk about; and—let me see—to Algiers, and to Africa, and to India twice."

"What is India like?"

"It's rather a hot place generally. I've been to America, to Canada, and to California, and, let me see—to be sure, I had forgotten—I've been to Lapland."

"What was that like?"

"It's rather a cold place. It rained a good deal when I was there. Of a night we generally had to sleep out in the open air. We had to light a large fire, and lie about round it, and to sleep in our wet clothes. It was rather uncomfortable, I remember, particularly when the fire went out; but I went there on a pleasure trip, and it did not do to complain. In India it sometimes rains. When I went there first we were sent up the hills. I got a bad cold, I recollect, being wet through day after day for a week or so. The camp was pitched on the top of a hill, and the different tribes on both sides were awful thieves. They used to creep up cautiously, and when they got a chance, steal all they could lay their hands on. They were not particular about a little killing, too, sometimes. I remember waking up in my mud hut one night, to find something dark crawling over me, that I took at first to be a big snake; but it was a naked arm with a knife in it. Don't you like truffles? I think they are much over-rated, as a rule; but these are good. The cookery's capital here. Don't you think so?"

"I don't know. No—yes. How provoking you are! I was listening to your story with breathless interest. Did the robber stab you?"

"No; he had not time."

"Ah! you called for help, and the sentinel came!"

"No; I had not time."

"Do tell the story properly. What prevented the man stabbing you?"

"I killed him. Yes, please, I'll take some more champagne. Let us talk of something more interesting," he added, presently. "You should never ask travelers questions, Miss Challice. Once set them going, they keep on forever. Do you like music? We shall have some good music to-night, and, I suppose, dancing. If there is, may I dance the first waltz with you?"

Harriet bowed her head in acquiescence. At the moment she could hardly have spoken. It seemed very strange and rather dreadful to be sitting next to someone who had taken the life of another. That delicate, white hand, with the slender fingers, had killed him—killed others, too, perhaps! How steady it was! The servant had filled the champagne-glass too full—to the very brim; but not a drop passed over the edge as Captain Everest raised it to his lips.

What was he saying about truffles? She did not like to ask. Those little black things, were they, in the white sauce? She tasted one mechanically, and thought that, may be, you only get properly to appreciate truffles after you had killed some men.

The remainder of the dinner they talked of other things—books, pictures, music, flowers, almost all matters that she knew something about, but he somehow had a way of speaking of them which might have been art, but seemed to have no art in it—and managed to give each subject he touched upon a new shape and interest she had never attached to it before; and she listened, by turns pleased and puzzled.

When she left the table, she found a quiet corner in the drawing-room, where, half hidden by a window-curtain, she could think over what she had heard, and ask herself, with respect to this Captain Everest, whether she admired or feared him most.

"My dear child, whatever are you doing here all by yourself?" asked Mrs. Challice, coming upon her suddenly. "And so you have really come away from school at last! What a shame of your mamma to shut you up there so long, and never let any of us see you! You must visit us often now, and I shall grow very fond of you. I never thought I had got such a pretty niece hidden away all these years. You must hide yourself no longer."

STEP II.

THE gentlemen were still down stairs in the dining-room, the windows of which were now thrown wide open; the moonlight streaming in through one fell upon the oak carving and upon the white face and horns of a stag's head, giving them a grim and ghostly look, and glittering in its glass eyes.

Most of the men yet sat round the table, having only drawn closer together at the end, where Charles Challice sat, and one or two were smoking at the windows, leaning against the window-frame, some lounging on the velvet sword below.

The talk, now that the ladies had gone, subsided, after a few odd sentences upon things generally, into the unadulterated horsey. The steeple chase just over was discussed at a length which I would be very sorry to make my readers sit and suffer by repetition.

Some of the men present were sporting men, *pur et simple*—only that doesn't exactly mean pureness and simplicity. Yet they were honorable men, all, and gentlemen, collected together that night round Charles Challice's hospitable board.

They were men who loved field sports, bred horses, and ran them fairly, squandering a good lot of money on that kind of fun, it may be here observed, but not losing other people's money, or more than they could pay. Challice had been a loser himself that day, but he was in no way down-hearted. He had never yet had any occasion to feel any worry about money since the time he was at school, and got in debt a pound or so with the tart-woman. There was no one more easy in his mind, with regard to money matters, present, with the exception, perhaps, of the Captain Everest, "who killed the man," smoking just now, outside there, upon the lawn.

When men after dinner get upon a topic in which they all feel a general interest, they are apt to talk loudly. Charles Challice had expressed indifference as to the non-success of a certain bay mare, Titania, of his, which had that day come in a bad third; but he loudly extolled the merits of his Flash o' Lightning, entered for next year's Derby, and offered to back it to a reasonable amount, with any one present.

"He's a right good horse, Charley," said a red-faced squire, coming from behind a huge regalia, that had enshadowed his face for the last quarter of an hour, and breaking a silence which had endured full thirty minutes; "but I would not pick him out to win. No; I wouldn't place him, even. See, here's the doctor; he knows the horse. What does he say now?"

"About what?" asked a jovial-looking gentleman, who just then entered at the door. "If I am to give a prescription, I must do it at once; I am in a hurry."

"A hurry, when you have only just come, Doctor," said Challice. "Why were you not here to dinner, by the way?"

"With the very best intentions, I have been unable to come any earlier," the Doctor replied. "There has been a most unusual demand upon my time. Two patients sent for me suddenly—one of them your aunt, Mr. Challice; but nothing to cause any alarm—a little over-excited from some cause or other. She will be quite well again, I hope, after a good night's rest. The other, old West, the maltster—thrown from his horse, coming home from the races—dislocation of the wrist. Then, just as I was starting, making sure to get here before dessert, a strange gentleman took it into his head to die; and as I was passing in my gig at the time, I could not well do less than get out, and see whether he had properly carried out his intention."

"And he had?"

"Oh, yes; he was dead sure enough—died in an apoplectic fit."

"Some one come from town for the races, I suppose, and lost all his money, perhaps?"

"No; not quite that. I thought at first he had won. He was loaded with notes and gold—about a thousand pounds!"

"That's a good deal to walk about within one's coat-tail pocket. Did anyone know anything about him?"

"Well, that's the odd part of the business. Everybody seemed to know too much of him, and yet not enough."

"Explain, doctor."

"Well, Benson—his name was Benson—appears to have been in the habit of lending money to the good people at East Haggleford, and charging them a good stiff rate of interest. For the last ten or fifteen years this has been going on; and as well as I can learn, there is scarcely a soul capable of offering anything like a tangible security who has not got on to Benson's books. The only thing nobody seems to have been able to do is to pay off the amount of the original loan; though, if you may believe the stories the victims, as they call themselves, have to tell, they have most of them repaid the amount over and over again in the shape of interest.

Periodically, at the end of every third month, as certain as quarter day, Mr. Benson has put in an appearance among our happy villagers, and asked them to take their little bills up—in some cases using threats, and extorting a larger amount; in others making the payment easier, or generously increasing the amount of the debtor's obligation; on all occasions, however, retiring in the end with a good, bulky pocket full of money; for it would appear, though I never heard of anyone else doing so there, Mr. Benson has found East Haggleford to be a kind of little gold mine!"

"Rather a new view of East Haggleford," said Charles Challice.

"I thought so, too—very! But here comes the curious part. Although, seemingly, Benson knew everything about our happy villagers, and had all their little secrets and private affairs off by heart, they knew absolutely nothing whatever about him. He came and went—that was all. They knew to a dead certainty that he would be there, and shook in their shoes as the hour approached. When he arrived, they handed him over a new bill, and so many bright sovereigns for interest; and he abused them and threatened them, ate and drank at their expense, and went on his way, none knew whither. The best informant said London, but that is a wideish address. However, that is all that is known. I tried to find out who it was who first brought Mr. Benson to this impecunious little community; but I could get no satisfactory information. Apparently, if anyone introduced him at all, that person had died long ago."

"But surely there were some papers in his pocket which would throw a light upon this mysterious party's place of residence."

"None! That is the singular part of it. Within half an hour of the time he was found dead in the Grange Road he had been drinking at Pember's, and there had received several bills of exchange and promissory notes. These he had put into a certain brown leather pocket-book—well known to all Mr. Benson's customers as being the strong-box, as it were, in which their precious signatures were safely guarded; and, when he was found, the pocket-book was not on him."

"That points to the fact that he was robbed—does it not?"

"No; I think not! It seems to prove that he had a friend—a partner—or something of that sort; because, when he was found, you must remember he had a pocket full of gold and notes."

"The person who took the book might have been interrupted in his search, and not had time to secure all the booty."

"At any rate, when the inquest takes place, there will be, if possible, an investigation into Mr. Benson's history; and, I suppose, some one or other will be found to come forward and claim the thousand pounds; and, by the way, a letter without an address, which I forgot to say was discovered in one of the dead man's pockets."

"A letter which might probably explain all the mystery?"

"Perhaps so," said the Doctor, "if the person it is addressed to can be found and will explain. Captain something it was. Let me see, now. Captain Everest?"

"—no."

"Everest?"

"Captain Everest; that was it! Do you know a Captain Everest?"

"Who wants me?" a languid voice from the window inquired, and Captain Everest stepped into the room and gazed unmoved upon the curious faces turned towards him.

"Everest," said Challice, "you are the very man wanted now—the only person alive who can clear up one of the darkest mysteries. In one word, do you know a party of the name of Benson?"

"Yes."

"Doctor, describe this Benson."

"He was a stout, red-faced man, with small gray whiskers, carried a heavy, gold, double eye-glass, and wore pepper and salt trousers, a high black waistcoat, a cutaway coat, and drab gaiters."

"I never saw Benson in my life, so cannot tell whether your description is accurate."

"But you know him, you say?"

"Well, I know his handwriting better than I know him. I have received letters from him for years."

"There is a letter waiting for you now, sir, at the 'Green Dragon,' said the Doctor, "which was found on the body of this Mr. Benson I have described, and who died about two hours ago in a fit of apoplexy in the Grange Road, East Haggleford. If you apply for it, you may be able to throw some light upon the business."

"I will send my servant for it," said Everest. "I hear music up-stairs, I think. We are to have a dance, are we not?"

The room was nearly empty by this time. The gentlemen having gone up-stairs to join the ladies, only Challice, the Doctor, and Everest remained. The latter said, after a momentary silence, "Did you say that the man you were describing was found dead to-night?"

"Yes."

"And that he was known by the name of Benson?"

"I went as far as to say that his name was Benson; but the way you put it is more accurate. It was as Benson he was known; but I have no doubt there exists a little information respecting his real name as there does about his place of residence."

"I saw such a man as you describe to-night in the Grange Road, Challice. Do you remember the man of business of whom your aunt spoke? That was the same man, and I recognized him at once."

"As Benson?"

"Certainly not. As I said before, I never saw Benson in my life; but I recognized this person as a man who upon two occasions has spoken to me of Benson when I have called at Benson's house."

"We're getting nearer to the solution of the mystery, then," said Challice.

"No," replied his friend, thoughtfully; "I think not. We are getting further off perhaps, Challice," he added, hastily. "It will take me only an hour to go to this inn and back. I shall return then in time for the first waltz. You will have some singing first, won't you?"

And with these words, he went away, without listening to what his friend replied.

A hastily scrawled note came by messenger an hour later, in which Everest told his friend that strange things had taken place, and that it was positively necessary he should start at once for London; but there was not a word of excuse for his breaking his engagement to dance the first waltz with Harriet.

She waited for him anxiously, refusing all other offers, and first pouted, and then tossed her head, and felt indignant, and then made her mind up to think no more of the matter, and danced, and laughed, and flirted with several other partners; and then, when bedtime arrived, lay awake full a couple of hours, wondering what on earth could have happened to cause Captain Everest to behave so rudely.

STEP III.

PROBABLY very few out of the many thousands who every day pass over Westminster Bridge and by Westminster Abbey have ever strayed from their path out of mere curiosity to explore the strange neighborhood lying close by under the shadow of the Abbey, as it were.

One of the sights of London, as it seems to me, are the old cloisters beneath the Abbey itself, of which Harrison Ainsworth has graphically written in his romance of "The Miser's Daughter;" and was it not in the Broad Sanctuary in old Westminster that Mr. Scarve himself and his beautiful daughter Hilda resided?

Well worthy of a visit are these romantic old cloisters. But few sight-seers at the Abbey visit them or even know of their existence. There are crumbling tombs almost as old as the fabric, and the oddest inscriptions. There are mysterious openings leading to dark cellars or vaults below, and mysterious doors leading goodness and the Dean and Chapter only know where. Even on noon-day at midsummer, it is cool and shady, and wonderfully lonely; but I best prefer to visit it on a still, moonlight night, and then its silent passages, dark, deserted corridors, and grass plots and tombs, to be peeped at only through rusty iron bars, are among the strangest, grimmest sights imaginable. If there are any ghosts wandering restlessly in Westminster, this surely must be one of the most popular of their resorts. I have never seen one myself, but there are solemn men who live here in holes and corners, who wear dark clothes, and have thoughtful, melancholy faces, who know much more about it than I do, and perhaps could tell us some creepy stories did they choose to do so.

Round about the Abbey is a collection of what are really the deadly-liveliest streets you will find anywhere throughout the whole of London—streets where there is never any bustle or excitement at any period, except, perhaps, on Sunday, at church-time, and even then the excitement is of the mildest.

There are streets by the river-side which are, from time to time flooded by the high spring tides, and cellars full of families washed up into the road; and at all other seasons, as it seems to me, the place wears a damp, dismal, unwholesome aspect. A shabby, smouldering, decayed neighborhood this, where low, gloomy beer-houses and taverns, and mean general shops jostle what must, once upon a time, have been brave mansions, for they show, still, antique porches, and massive carved lintels; and on either side of the doors of some of them are yet the rusty wrecks of the extinguishers, which served the running footmen in good Queen Anne's days to put out their torches when my lord and lady had reached home safely in their sedan chairs. Parliamentary agents and civil engineers have their offices in many of these mansions, but one or two are fallen very low indeed, and are let out now in tenements, or been devoted wholly to unsavory trades, and some others are in a ruinous condition, seemingly locked up and deserted; the worst among these latter, perhaps, being that in front of which, early on the day following the event related, Captain Everest's Hansom cab drew up, and Captain Everest alighted.

The dead man known as Benson had lived here.

It was a dreary-looking residence, even in that dreary street, standing out conspicuously on account of its mournful and neglected aspect. Some time or other the knocker had been feloniously appropriated, and the door badly damaged in the process. Street boys had found intense excitement and little risk in the smashing of its windows by the aid of catapults.

The parlor shutters were closed, but time-stained blinds, as brown as though they had been soaked in coffee, hung awry across the first floor windows, the interior being veiled in impenetrable obscurity.

The gossips in the neighborhood said of this house that it was cursed or haunted, and that dim, rumbling noises were audible within in the dead of the night; that its cellars were full of rats, and that there were death-watches in every crumbling wall; but as these disagreeables solely concerned the house's owner, who lived there all by himself, and an ancient woman, of woe-begone visage, who charred for him, and as neither of them ever complained, and, indeed, one seemed to thrive and grow even rosy on them, what more was to be said?

Captain Everest jumped out of his cab, and laying hold of the rusty bell-handle, gave a long, strong pull, and waited patiently—waited very patiently for three minutes at least; then rang again, and again waited; rang a third time, and walked out into the road.

Whilst he stood there, the ancient female alluded to came out of a tallow-chandler's shop opposite, hobbled across the road, and laid her skinny hand upon his arm.

"Do you want Mr. Benson, sir?"

"Yes."

"He's not been home for two days, sir."

"Does no one else live in the house?"

"Nothing's in there now, sir, except the cat. You may hear the cat mewing inside now, if you listen at the door. There's rats enough, though, that's one good thing. She won't starve yet awhile."

"I would make some inquiries about him," said Everest. "Whom should I apply to, can you tell me?"

"I don't think anyone knows more about him than I do myself," the woman replied, "and that is very little. Mr. Benson is a very close gentleman, and keeps his own counsel. I don't suppose there's anybody knows much about him, unless it's what he wants 'em to know, and he hates any one poking and prying into his affairs. If you've any message to leave, sir, I'll take charge of it; but you're wasting your time if you want to ask questions, 'cause I know nothing when they're asked."

Everest, however, was of a different opinion, it would have seemed, for he did not abandon the case as hopeless upon receiving this assurance; on the contrary, he asked the charwoman very politely whether she lived anywhere thereabouts, as he wished very much to say a few words to her, pressing half-a-crown into her hand as he spoke. Upon this, she proposed that, as she lived at least half a mile away, and the "Rising Sun," a most quiet and respectable house, the landlady of which she had known for fifteen years and more, was close and handy—not twenty doors off—that they should go there, where, in the private bar, she could listen to what Captain Everest had to say.

Provided then with liquor which best suited her taste, the charwoman seemed more inclined to listen than to impart information. In the first place, Everest informed her that the stout red man, who had died at East Haggleford, was known there by the name of Benson. Upon this the woman asked various questions relating to his personal appearance, the clothes he wore, and other particulars, concluding, upon receiving Everest's answer, by gulping down her gin and water, as she exclaimed, "That poor cat! what'll become of it if they don't break the door open? There's not a drop of anything in the house it can get at to drink!"

This way of receiving the intelligence of Mr. Benson's demise was a little startling, perhaps, but, at the same time, it showed that the woman's mouth had not been closed on account of any love which she bore towards her late employer. The real fact of the case was that she knew nothing, or next to nothing, about Mr. Benson's affairs.

"You see, sir, he was so uncommon close about most things, I really, if I was put in the box, and had to swear to it, couldn't say positive what was his right name."

"Why not Benson?"

"Well, if you was to ask me on my oath, sir," said the charwoman, "I couldn't say truly that I ever heard him called by that name and answer to it."

"How do you mean?"

"I went to the house every day, sir, for an hour in the morning, to clear up a bit; he'd never let any regular servant live there; and I've heard, perhaps, three score times or more during the many years I've worked for him—over ten it is—people ask him if his name was Benson, and he always said it wasn't and never said it was."

"Had he a partner or clerk, or anyone associated with him in business?"

"I never saw a soul except the persons who came to him to borrow money; and to them, when I've overheard any of the talk—that's not been very often, of course—a dozen times or so, perhaps—I've always heard him speak of Mr. Benson as if he was somebody else he'd got to see and consult with about lending the money."

"But when letters came, were they directed to Benson?"

"Yes; and he has opened some that were directed so before me."

"And the tax-papers—when they have come?"

"Were made out to Mr. Benson."

"You have no other reasons for supposing that your late employer's name was not Benson other than those you have given?"

"No; nor any reason for supposing it was. All the time I have known him we have scarcely ever exchanged a word more than was quite necessary about anything. He used to let me in when I came in the morning, and let me out when I went away. All he said at most was, 'Good morning,' and 'Good night, thank you, Mrs. Parkes.' 'Get me that,' or 'Get me this.' He was never near or mean, and never counted up his change and grumbled over a halfpenny overcharged, like some other people. I don't think he was a bad man," said the charwoman, here suddenly lapsing into a somewhat maudlin mood, consequent upon a second glass of gin and water, and wiping her eyes with her apron. "No, poor fellow! He had his failings, as we all have, but he had his good points. He was very fond of his cat!"

THE FOURTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH THE THIRD WOLF BREAKS LOOSE.

- STEP I.—THE BLACK CAT AND THE CONVICT.
 " II.—IN THE GIPSY CAMP.
 " III.—HUNTING DOWN THE RUNAWAY.
 " IV.—THE FOOTMAN PUZZLED.

STEP I.

FINDING that the charwoman could give no more information, Captain Everest turned to the landlady, and ascertained that there was another tavern near at hand where there was a parlor that Mr. Benson was in the habit of "using."

Here Everest made further inquiries, but could learn nothing of any moment respecting the dead man. Of his doings, he heard that Mr. Benson came there frequently; that he almost invariably sat in the same corner, and drank hot Irish whisky, and smoked a churchwarden pipe.

Of his sayings, however, very little was to be recorded. The waiter said Mr. Benson was what he would call "a keep-to-yourself sort of man," but a perfect gentleman, from which it may be inferred that he did not forget the waiter's fees.

And Everest could learn nothing else, and presently took his departure, on the whole in greater perplexity than when he first started on this voyage of discovery.

But it may be asked at this point, not unnaturally, what interest Everest had in making these inquiries; and if he were in any way entitled to share in the money the man known as Benson had left behind, why he did not place the matter in his lawyer's hands, and allow the proper legal steps to be taken in the usual way? We shall see how this was directly.

The money-lender's sudden death and the large amount of money he was supposed to have left behind him—for, of course, the thousand pounds in notes and gold represented only a very small portion of his wealth—formed the topic of general conversation in the neighborhood in which he had lived; and groups of gossips lay their heads together at the street corners, and stared wistfully up at the silent house, now darker, more dreary and mysterious, than ever; and throughout the night the unfortunate cat locked up within was heard at intervals mewing dimly.

It was suggested by the most tender-hearted among the lady gossips that steps should be taken to release the captive thus being done to death, with only a two-inch plank separating it from succor and sympathy; but the learned authorities of the sterner sex, among whom the policeman on that beat was numbered, said that to effect a forcible entrance upon the premises, in the position in which matters stood at present, would be a crime little short of high treason, and punishable by unlimited imprisonment. The poor cat, therefore, was left to languish; and the recollection of its pitiful cries, may be, haunted the dreams, and disturbed the slumbers of one or more of those who had advocated its rescue. Certainly of one—the wife of the tallow-chandler living opposite; for she hearing, as she on many subsequent occasions solemnly asserted, just half an hour before daybreak, the cat give one loud, piercing cry, which was distinctly audible right across the street, in the second-floor front room where the tallow-chandler and his spouse slept, she got out of bed, and went, in her nightcap, to the window to look out.

In the first floor of the house opposite she then saw a faint light moving to and fro in an awfully mysterious and ghost-like way; and calling the tallow-chandler to come and look also, they both saw a shadowy form cross and recross the light, and approaching the window, stand looking into the street, where it remained for several minutes, and then, returning to the back of the room, disappeared with the light.

All which terrified Mr. and Mrs. Tallow-chandler dreadfully, and they scrambled back into bed and covered their heads over with the bed-clothes, making sure they had seen Benson's ghost.

Next morning the person living in the house next to that of the money-lender's found a large black cat sitting upon the step of his back door, which, as it came mewing up to him, rubbing its head against his legs, he recognized as the money-lender's cat.

Putting one thing with another, he easily came to the conclusion that somebody must have opened a door before the cat could have made its escape; and this proved to be the case.

Mr. Benson's house had been broken into, and its contents thoroughly rifled, with the exception of an iron safe, which contained, it afterwards was found, a large sum of money, and several valuable bonds and deeds.

"Charlie," said Captain Everest, when he reached Haggleford Hall, "supposing you had only three hundred pounds in the world, and no possible chance of ever getting any more, what would you do with it?"

"Put every farthing on Flash o' Lightning for next year's Derby."

"That's not a bad idea, and I feel half inclined to take your advice."

"You take my advice? What do you mean!"

"I was quoting my own case."

"What nonsense! Why I remember your telling me you had twelve hundred a year; and I recollect your saying it was not enough to live on!"

"Most likely. And it was the truth. I used to have. Do you recollect that man they called Benson dying in your village?"

"To be sure I do. I have heard and read enough about him."

"I can tell you just one thing you have not heard, though. Every three months, for the last seventeen years, I have, at a certain date, regularly received a check for three hundred pounds, which has been honored by the banker and squandered by myself with the most praiseworthy punctuality. Those checks were signed 'Joseph Benson'; but why Joseph Benson should have supplied me with this liberal income after educating me and purchasing my commission, without ever himself appearing to me in the flesh, is more than I can say. The man who died, and who was known as Benson, deposited money in the bank by Benson's orders. The same man lent Benson's money, acting as his agent; the same man denied himself to me when I called on him upon several occasions, wishing to see my invisible benefactor. The question is, then, is there a Benson, or is there not, and was it or was it not some strange freak of the dead man's to systematically disguise his identity?"

"And how on earth is that to be found out?"

"Only by waiting patiently until my next three hundred would, in the regular course of things, come due. But, in the meanwhile, what am I to do with my three hundred pounds, which, up to now, I have resolutely abstained from breaking into. It is not half enough to pay my debts. And, as you say, it seems to me, I could not do better than put it on your horse, 'Flash o' Lightning.' What are the odds?"

On the night when the man called Benson died, lights glimmered in the windows of the happy villagers' honeysuckle-entwined cottages until an unwonted hour; not a few of these favored rustics stopping up to give their sleepy wives a long, rambling account of the tragic event, one or two, whose speech was too defective to venture on such a proceeding, perhaps, went to bed with their boots on, and forgot to put out the candle.

In Mrs. Challice's bedroom, at The Grange, a faint glimmer lasted until day broke, and faithful, loving Martha left her mistress's bedside, and crept wearily down stairs to light the kitchen fire and make a cup of strong tea. An anxious night was this to the old servant, a night of prayers and tears, and day came at length almost like the tidings of a reprieve to one condemned to death.

But all through the night, upon the outskirts of the straggling wood skirting the meadow land where the races had been run, a fire burnt luridly, and its reflection spread across the country far away to the low-lying, desolate marsh ground, and the pebbly waste beyond, which was covered at high tide by the sea.

The sentry, passing to and fro upon the walls of the grim convict prison by the sea-side, saw the light well, and now and then halted in his monotonous walk to gaze upon it enviously, for it spoke to him of warmth and jolly companionship, of a gipsy encampment, of a good supper, and a mug of the right sort to wash it down; of swarthy, bright-eyed, white-teethed Romanies, among whom might also chance to be some dusky beauties, too. Before that sentry had gone soldiering, he had been something of a vagabond himself, and had tasted of the pleasures of tent life.

"I'd rather be there than here just now," he muttered; and then, as a recollection of some peccadillo in his past life forced itself upon his memory, he added, with quiet gratitude in his tone, "I'd rather be here, though, than lodged like many of the others."

By which he meant the numbered lodgers in the hideous woolen livery, safely stowed away for the night, whom it was his duty in the daytime to watch and shoot down, when necessary, as they worked together in gangs in the quarries, or out upon the roads. But it was not a wise remark of the soldier's, nevertheless, for scarcely had the words passed his lips, when something crept, catlike, out upon him from the deep shadow of the wall, and bore him to the earth with irresistible force, tightly grasping his throat with an iron grip, which only released its hold on him when he was motionless, with black, swollen features.

Then the noiseless figure, barefooted and bareheaded, crept back into the darkness, and had stolen away, as it had come, like some ominous shadow, silently.

STEP II.

OUR ex-dancing master, with his pocket full of waste paper, also saw the ruddy light from the gipsy camp; for this time, leaving the village in a different direction to that he had taken after his ducking, he came out upon the hill-side, overlooking the race-course and the wood behind it.

"I'll go down there and beg of them to let me dry my clothes and sleep by the fire," he thought to himself; and without loss of time carried out his resolution.

Near the race-course there were two refreshment booths, through the canvas sides of which glimmered faintly the light of tallow candles, carried about within by two persons employed in packing up what was left of the stock of liquors and provisions. The smoke from a yellow "living van," in which some adventurous showman had brought down an Albanian lady and a fat boy, showed that the fire lighted there to cook the scanty supper had not yet expired; but the race-course itself was a dreary scene of desolation, beyond which the ruddy blaze shone out with added brightness from the gloominess of its surroundings.

A strange sight was this gipsy encampment, even to the ex-dancing master, who before now had slept by a fire-side beneath green trees. A party of about a dozen men and women, young and old, were standing, sitting or lying about, and the red glare lighted up their weird faces and motley garb, giving them an unreal, theatrical look, which brought back recollections of the revelries of Esmeralda's kinsfolk in old Paris.

As the wanderer approached, singing was going on; a half-drunken, half-idiot boy, the singer, drawing out an old Romany song, half-dirge it seemed to be, in a

melancholy, low, passionate voice, gesticulating wildly from time to time, and writhing like some one possessed.

Near to him sat a girl of about nineteen, who looked, however, several years older, and might have been called very pretty, except that a weary, pained look spoiled her features.

In a jaded, lifeless, mechanical fashion, she beat a tambourine, and rattled its bells dolefully to the tune of the idiot's song.

Round these two the rest of the Bohemians were gathered; a muscular giant, with uncovered brown arms, and a bare breast, was sprawling on the grass, where the light fell full upon his black locks and gleaming teeth. An old woman, with a red handkerchief knotted under her chin, mouthed and mumbled, nodding her head. Two swarthy, bold-eyed gipsy girls, one smoking a pipe, listened with all their ears, nudging one another now and then as some special point in the song elicited their approval.

The background was filled up with more eager swarthy faces and bright eyes, all following the performance with profound attention, as though, which was not the case, they had never seen or heard it before.

From a tripod over the fire hung the iron kettle the supper was cooking in, and from it a very savory and appetizing smell was wafted on the breeze towards the outcast, who stood still, and made his mind up to wait until the ditty had come to an end. In this intention, however, he was thwarted; for the quick ears of one of the young men of the tribe had caught the sound of the crackling brushwood on which he trod, and he, giving a low whistle, the music instantly stopped, and the whole party, motionless and silent, awaited the stranger's approach.

Summoning up the courage necessary under the circumstances, he stepped boldly forward, and said, "I am stranger in this part of the country, and I've been set upon by the people in the village over yonder. Will you let me lie in a corner by your fire, and go to sleep? I'm a poor man, but I've enough to pay for my night's lodging if you will give it me. I'm wet to the skin, and as tired as a dog."

There was no direct reply, when, reaching this point in his appeal, he took breath, and waited for their decision.

"We want none of you sort of fellows here," the gipsy giant sprawling on the ground grumbled; and added some sort of words in gipsy cant, to the effect that the new-comer's room was worth more than his company, and that they could get on without any spies and eaves-droppers.

Here the ex-dancing-master, taking up the speech again, declaring in good Romany that he was neither spy nor eaves-dropper, and begged again that they would extend their hospitality to him, a poor, houseless, friendless wanderer; and spoke with such earnestness, and so much to the point, that he created an evident curiosity and sympathy in the breasts of some of his female listeners. The Zingara girl with the tambourine was the first to speak.

"Why should he not rest here, Ishmael?" she said. "Will he do us any harm?"

"He'll do us no good," the gipsy man replied, sullenly. "I saw the sort he was with upon the course—thieves all of them. If he's seen here among us it will give us a bad name, and that's not wanted. Everyone's hand is raised against us as it is."

"That's a true word," observed one of the old men.

"Who is he, and what tribe does he belong to, and why is he not with them now? Where did he pick up our tongue?"

"It was years ago," the ex-dancing master answered; "when I was a boy. I learnt it among the Zingari in Spain."

"What part of Spain?" the girl asked, with interest.

"In Seville," he replied; "in the Macarena. It was there I learnt to dance the Bolero, the Malagena, the Rondena, the Malaga—the Bull-fight dance."

At the sound of this last name, the idiot boy caught the tambourine from the girl's hand, and springing to his feet, capered fantastically, screeching some half-savage air at the top of his voice, and banging and jingling the musical instrument like one possessed.

This sudden outbreak diverted the attention of the company from the shivering applicant, who, taking advantage of their attention being withdrawn from him, crept timidly near to the fire, and stooped down and warmed his hands. At a motion from the gipsy girl he then sat down upon some dry straw, the gipsies tacitly giving their consent to this proceeding, and taking no more notice of him. In about a quarter of an hour or so a woman who had been superintending the cookery announced that supper was ready.

His long walk had made our rogue hungry again, in spite of the grand dinner he had eaten at Em PEMBER's expense, and he looked wistfully at the savory dish. When they had eaten for a few moments, however, one of the women passed him some meat, and he fell to, without waiting to be asked twice.

The meal over, some of the women retired into the tents, while the men lay about, chatting together, round the fire; and the rogue, overcome by fatigue, after nodding many times, and catching himself up in the act of falling head first into the flames, rolled over on his back, and fell fast asleep.

A rapid succession of shots, and the ringing of a deep-toned bell from the convict prison, aroused him suddenly.

He found several of the gipsies already on their feet, eagerly peering out into the darkness.

"Something is wrong at the jail," Ishmael said. "A revolt of the prisoners, perhaps. There's been one threatening a long while, I am told. They treat them very bad."

"It's an escape, more likely, or an attempt at one. They never get clear away, or seldom."

The sound of the tolling bell still resounded ominously across the meadows and marsh land.

"That's well-nigh scaring his life out, whoever it is that's running for it, I'll swear!" said one of the gipsies.

"You're right," another replied; "and he'll have had to get a long way, too, before he finds himself clear of the sound of that clanging."

"The hue and cry will be out all over the countryside before morning, and the police and jailers down on us as well as the rest, turning everything inside out!"

"We had best set things straight, then. I'll warrant there's little time to lose."

Little enough it proved for, within a quarter of an hour, a party of warders and mounted police, naturally attracted by the reflection of the bonfire, rode up to make inquiries. Had anything been seen of a runaway convict, the leader of the party asked; and, without waiting for a reply, dismounted, and strode towards the first tent, dragging the ragged covering on one side to inspect the interior. Only the shrinking forms and frightened faces of two gipsy women there met his gaze, but he passed on to the next tent, and the next, followed by scowling looks and low-muttered curses.

But half-satisfied with the result of his inspection, the head warder of the prison—who was in command of the expedition—imperatively bade everyone one to come out from under canvas, and told a couple of the policemen to make a thorough search.

"Who is this fellow?" he said, laying his hand heavily upon the ex-dancing master's shoulder, and twisting him half-round, so that the light reached him more effectively. "I should know your features; and I do. You're a man called Deverel, and came out from Portland on a ticket-of-leave eighteen months ago. Have you reported yourself regularly?"

"Yes."

"What are you doing for a livelihood?"

"What I can."

"That's the truth, I suppose. What are you doing in this part of the country? Of course you know well enough your old comrade has broken out to-night?"

"Spicer?"

"Yes."

The ex-dancing master's countenance, on which there was a look of wonder and dread curiously mixed, proved clearly enough to the warder's practised eyes that he spoke the truth.

The other let go of him, and walked away; but half a dozen yards off came to a standstill, and turned round.

"Don't miss a foot of this place in your search, men," he said, "You'll find something else worth looking for, I'll be bound, though Spicer may not be hidden in the camp. Be quick about it, too—we must get on."

The scrutiny, though rapidly made, was tolerably exhaustive, and brought to light the bodies of some stolen poultry, which the gipsies had not had time to stow away more cleverly.

There was more important business on hand, so these discoveries elicited but little remark. The head warder, however, was heard to say he would presently send back one of the officers to watch the camp, and the gipsies, and Deverel, the ex-dancing master, whose future movements might prove interesting. The warders and police then retired, and the ticket-of-leave man crouched down again in front of the fire.

But he was much mistaken if he expected to be allowed to remain there any longer in peace. The burly Ishmael advanced towards him with an oath, and roughly shaking him, bade him instantly depart.

"Clear out of this," he said. "We want no branded thieves among us to cause the police to look over our little stores. Go back where you came from, or anywhere else, but go, and lose no time about it."

There was no answer to be made to this argument, if argument it could be called, nor did Deverel attempt to do so. He simply rose and went quietly away, the gipsies, men and women following him with their eyes, until he turned a corner in the wood and was lost to view; and as he looked back he saw the gipsy girl's eyes followed him with the rest, pityingly, though, and kindly.

It was not a very comfortable prospect that our luckless rogue had got to look forward to during the remainder of that long, wearisome night. He could hardly make his mind up whether the temporary warmth and succor afforded him had proved a benefit to him in the end or not. It was a somewhat severe change from the hot fireside to the bleak, open country, across which a cold wind, that had risen within the hour, blew in fitful gusts, rustling his rags and tatters.

He made up his mind to keep under the trees, and take up his quarters till daybreak in the most sheltered spot he could find among the brushwood, and, therefore, plunged into the thickest part of the forest.

A strange, ghostly aspect had the scene before him at this moment. The moonlight struggled through the branches overhead, and danced upon the gnarled and misshapen trunks of venerable trees to which the hoary lichen clung thickly, or the moss-covered, distorted shape of others that looked like crouching giants the flickering light gave life to, while the faint moaning of the wind had the effect of human voices sighing in grief or pain.

Before he had gone very far he came upon what seemed to be the entrance to a cave, the mouth of which was half choked up by the briars, but from what he could see of the interior, into which, now and then, as the air stirred the leaves overhead, a ray of moonlight penetrated, it seemed dry and sheltered. It was at any rate, he thought, as good a shelter as he could hope to find, and without troubling his head to wonder whether any stray adders, lizards or toads might previously have come to a similar conclusion and gone to bed there first, he turned his back on the light, stooped his head, and crept in.

But surely, a man does not often meet with such a surprising and disconcerting reception as that our rogue met with now, for the moment he got inside a violent blow upon the shoulder flung him backwards upon the ground, and something (in his first fright he could not immediately decide whether it was a man or beast) fell heavily upon him, and clutched viciously at his throat. The situation was serious enough, but there was no time for consideration. He saw plainly he must fight for his life. Closing with his unknown assailant, he, in his turn, did his best to strangle him, and, locked in a tight embrace, they came crashing through the brushwood, and rolled over and over down a hillock in front of the cave, lying, at last, panting for breath, in an open space where the moonlight fell upon them.

This time Deverel had got the upper hand in the brief but severe contest, and the other lay passively in his power. Only for a moment, though, for he had been feigning utter exhaustion as a cover for his next move, which was to draw from his breast, and stealthily unclasp, a formidable-looking knife.

Happily for the ex-dancing master's future prospects, he caught sight of the glittering steel, and he was just in time to seize on and pin down the hand that held it. Then, with a violent wrench, he tore it away, and brandished it on high.

Now his assailant seemed to lose all courage, and writhing and twisting feebly in the iron grip that was upon him, began to whine pitifully for mercy, and to shake in every limb with abject terror.

"Let me go!" he cried, incoherently. "Let me go! I can't go back—I can't bear it! They'll hang me for what I've done! Let me go! What have I done to you?"

"Not much, as it happens," Deverel replied. "But you would have settled me if you could. You fool! I don't want to give you up; I'm not a policeman. You began first; I didn't wish to molest you."

"Let me get up then. What made you come creeping into that hole if it was not to take me? Give me back my knife, and let me get up."

One might have fancied that Deverel would have received this proposition with suspicion, but such was not the case. Without hesitation, he flung the knife towards the other man, and stood silently watching him as he picked it up and replaced it in his pocket. When he had done so, Deverel's late assailant, scowling darkly, began to shuffle away. But at his first step Deverel called to him by name.

"Spicer!"

This brought him to a sudden standstill.

"It is you, then?" he said. "I thought I knew your voice, Dick, but I couldn't get a fair look at you."

"You'd have found me a good deal changed, maybe, if you had," Deverel said, sullenly; "but not so much so but that the warder knew my visage again, to-night, at the first glance."

"You saw him to-night, then?"

"I met him in the wood, when I was camping out with the gipsies. He came there to look for you."

"Yes; curse him! He and the rest have been scouring the whole country over. I know that. I lay there, just now, groveling in the mud in that rat's hole, and listened to their footsteps, just before you came. I took you for one of them, returned."

"He has sharp eyes for a likeness, it seems, and I daresay the other warders take after him. How do you hope to get away—with the convict dress, too?"

The other came quickly towards him, and said, earnestly, "You can help me to this. As an old companion, you won't refuse. You won't leave me here, to be taken?"

"Come, come," responded Deverel, with a slight sneer; "you alter your cry every ten minutes. First you want me to let you go, and then you tell me not to go. What would you have?"

"This cursed livery cripples me, and keeps me here chained to this hateful spot. I can't myself buy other clothes; but I have money to purchase them with if I had the chance. The only way I can get that is by cunning or force, and either way may take time and prove too dangerous; but you can do it easily. You seem as hard up as you well can be. Your clothes are no more than rags; but I can pay down their weight in gold. What say you? Go to the gipsies, and buy some new clothes for yourself; give me the old rags; that's enough! I'll be able to get away so without loss of time—before daybreak."

Deverel listened to this without any show of enthusiasm, and listlessly contemplated two or three bright gold pieces, which the convict held forth in his hand, letting the moonlight glitter on them temptingly.

"What do you say, Dick? Come, now, what are you thinking of?"

"What am I thinking of?" the ex-dancing master replied, with a short, jarring laugh. "Of our strange meeting, after all this long time. It's natural enough I should have that in my head, isn't it? I was thinking how odd it was to hear you asking a favor of me, after all this time, and after what had passed between us."

"If I have ever done you an injury, Dick—"

"Injury, eh! but we won't go into that. What I did I did with a knowledge of the consequences. I have no one to blame but myself."

"You got out many a long month before me, Dick, and I should have lain there months and months yet if I had not contrived to escape. It was a struggle, though, and I can't make out myself how it is I'm here now to tell the tale, instead of lying smashed up and stone dead beneath the prison wall there. But now I've done so much, and got so far, you won't shelve me—say you won't?"

Deverel hesitated, and seemed to make up his mind at first, but presently he said, "There! yes, give me your money. Get back into the hole, and keep a sharp look-out. I won't be long."

And next minute he was gone upon his errand.

He was not absent a long while, not more than half an hour, but each moment seemed like an age to the trembling convict, waiting, watching, and taking every tiny sound of rustling leaves and crackling boughs to indicate the close proximity of his pursuers.

"He'll never come back!" Spicer muttered to himself. "He'll never come back! I was a fool to trust him! He'll sell me—I know he will! I won't wait! I'll run for it while I can."

But he did not do so, for the recollection of Dick Deverel's companionship in former times returned to him. As far as this sneaking, treacherous convict was capable of belief in anything or anybody, he had faith in his old jail companion, Dick.

With a sigh of relief, then, he heard at last Dick's whistle afar off, and Deverel appeared in view on the brow of the hill.

He had been successful in his negotiation, though he had to use a great deal of persuasion, alleging that the things he wore were still soaking wet, and that if he lay about in them all night, he would surely die of cold. This story, however, would probably not have melted the heart of Ishmael, the gipsy, to whom he told it, had it not been accompanied by the exhibition of one of the gold pieces (half a sovereign), which was, in truth, a good round sum to pay for the bundle of rags its magic presence conjured forth from the depths of an old gipsy woman's sleeping apartment, where the tribe's surplus stock of wearing apparel was stowed away.

"Here you are, Dick!" whispered the convict, eagerly. "I knew you'd come back."

"Of course I would," the other said, with an angry glance. "What do you mean?"

"Nothing—nothing! One does not know whom to trust, but I felt I could trust you!"

"We need not rely on each other for long, in that or any other respect. We have our separate roads to travel, I suppose. The world's wide enough for both of us to get along without rubbing shoulders."

"There's no occasion to part company this instant, is there? Which way are you going?"

"To London."

"So am I. That's the only safe place. I'll get there as quickly as possible. Keep along with me till we're clear out of this, and I'll do the liberal. You know me of old!"

"Yes, yes—well enough; but I do not care to work with you again! I've other views. We'd best part company as soon as may be."

"As you like, Dick—as you like. You've done me a good turn, and I sha'n't forget it. Is this your coat? There are so many holes I can't find the sleeve. What's this?"

"Nothing. Give it me. I picked it up on the race-course, and may get a crown from the owner, if I can find him."

It was the dead money-lender's pocket-book.

STEP IV.

The escaped convict passed it to him slowly, eyeing it with curiosity as he did so.

"That's very strange, too!" he said.

"What is strange?"

"That I should have met you."

"Yes. Well?"

"And more singular still that I should next meet with that, or with something like that, for it can't be the same. That's too unlikely!"

A rustling of the brushwood close by them brought the conversation to an end. Fortunately, however, there was no cause for alarm. It was only a fox creeping out of his hole to sniff the earliest breath of morn. But the interruption served to hurry their movements, and within a few moments they had quitted the wood.

They did not part company immediately, as Deverel had proposed. Indeed, the risk he ran himself by being in the convict's company was very small in comparison to the great advantage the convict derived by the association—for obviously the less the latter showed himself, the better. Their first act was to sink the prison dress in a pond, heavily weighted with stones, and then to make their way across country to a railway station—not the nearest—and take tickets for some place three-quarters of the way to London, there to change again, thus puzzling the police as much as possible, should any be upon the watch.

Deverel was glad enough to get his fare paid up to town, and a moderately substantial feed upon the road. However, immediately they reached their destination he determined to say good-bye to his old friend at once and forever.

There was no love lost between them, and they had no sympathies in common. They, therefore, held but little conversation upon the way, each silently brooding over his own thoughts.

Once only Spicer reverted to the question of the pocket-book, and asked whether the owner's name was inside it, and whereabouts he lived; to both of which questions the other rogue, with a rogue's instinct, which leads him on every occasion to tell a lie, however useless, gave untrue answers; and there the matter dropped.

Owing to certain delays which they thought it politic to make, it was late in the afternoon when they at last got to town, although the distance was not over fifty miles.

They descended eventually at a station about two miles from the terminus, and situated in a north-east suburb of London; and here they bade each other good-bye.

"We're not to be partners any longer, then?" Spicer inquired.

"I think not. We'll work best alone."

"As you will. It's for you to say; but I should have thought otherwise. And the little nest-egg I've got here," said Spicer, pulling out a bag, in which his gold was tied up, "might have started us."

"You'll have enough to do to take care of yourself," said Deverel.

"I'll work more cautious in future, and lie dark for a bit till the police have settled down again. Besides, I had a scheme two of us might have worked together."

"You will find some one else easily enough. I have plans of my own."

"Good-bye, then, to you, and good luck!"

"Good-bye, and good luck!"

They parted thus, and a dozen yards or so away Spicer turned round to look after his old friend. But the latter went straight on without looking back, and presently was lost to view.

"Dick's a deal changed," said the convict to himself. "What's his game now, I wonder? I'd give the world to know!"

What, indeed, was the game of this ex-dancing-master, ex-thief, and ex-jail-bird? Perhaps, at this moment, he could not very well have answered the question himself. He even might have had no object in view at all, and only the vaguest and most confused ideas respecting the prize now resting comfortably in his breast pocket.

But an hour later, in the screened box of a quiet waterside tavern in Westminster, the contents of the pocket-book were spread out before him, and he sat with knitted brows, biting his nails and pondering.

Still deep in thought was he when the potman came in, two hours later, and fidgeted with the gas, as a hint that he had better give another order or go.

"Do you know anything of a Mr. Benson residing hereabouts?" asked Deverel.

"I know a little about a Mr. Benson who used to live here; but he don't live anywhere just now—he's dead!"

"Dead, is he? Long ago?"

"Last night."

"He was well off, wasn't he? I suppose his relations will come into a good thing?"

"I'm not sure there are any to come into it. I'm told none can be found. It's an ill wind that blows nobody any good, though; that's what I say."

"Certainly; though I don't catch your exact meaning."

"Well, you see, Benson lent money, it seems, and charged a lot of interest. Now, what I say is this—if no next of kin turns up, all the poor beggars he held bills of will wipe out their debts nice and comfortable and start fair."

"To be sure!" said Deverel. "I never thought of that. Give me another four of hot brandy."

When the potman, having executed this order, returned to the room, he found his questioner smiling and talking to himself, and rubbing his hands, as though with excessive glee.

This puzzled the potman very much.

THE FIFTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH YET ANOTHER WOLF SHOWS HIS TEETH.

STEP I.—BROKEN SENTENCES.

"II.—THE KISS BY THE ROADSIDE.

"III.—FLASH O' LIGHTNING.

"IV.—THE FOURTH WOLF AT WORK.

STEP I.

And those among my readers who are puzzled also, and yet discern no glimpse of the venturesome game that Dick Deverel may some day play, I must leave to puzzle themselves a little longer, and see what is doing elsewhere, by people whose thoughts are not running on the seemingly absorbing theme of the dead money-lender's nearest relations.

Not at all extraordinary was it that she whose young life and love was presently to be blighted by a dead man's agency, was as yet equally unconscious that he had ever lived. It seemed in those first happy days at the Hall impossible to Harriet Challice to imagine this would not always go on just the same. There would, surely, never be any change. There would always be grand banquets and fine company, lights and music. After all, the world was really as she had pictured it to herself whilst yet an inmate of the Chiswick school.

Through her life the young girl had seen little or nothing of her mother, whose affections, indeed, seemed locked up in the son she had lost. Mother and daughter met when the long school-days at length came to a close almost like strangers, and the girl's timid advances were received in a cold, repellent manner, that chilled her heart and filled her eyes with tears. Not that the mother felt any dislike towards her younger child, but the crushing weight of the one dreadful secret ever hanging over her, paralyzed, as it were, all other feeling. She had a feverish yearning for her daughter's love—the strongest possible motive for obtaining a hold on her affections, but she could not play her part.

One idea alone haunted her day and night. She thought that the danger so long threatened was drawing nearer and nearer. Presently it would come with a crash upon her, and then followed the inevitable ruin and disgrace.

Could nothing avert it? Yes, one thing might make all right, and there seemed a chance of this one thing happening. The news of it was like the sight of water to the sinking camel on the desert.

On the morning of the day following the money-lender's death, Charles Challice rode over at an early hour to inquire after his aunt's health, and was asked up into her room. The old lady looked gray and ghastly in the morning light, although some small attempts at toilet had been hastily performed for his benefit, not forgetting a suspicion of rouge, which was glaringly evident in the center of the yellow skin, beneath the dull, sunken eyes.

Shocked by her appearance—she seemed very ill indeed to him—Challice began to ask her questions eagerly; whether she had seen the doctor that morning? what he had said last night? and so on, ending by inquiring whether she would not wish to see her daughter?

"Oh, no—no!" the old woman responded eagerly. "There is no occasion for that. I am very much better! A little time—that is all. Harriet heard nothing of my illness, did she, last night?"

"Nothing. The doctor told me it was your particular desire she should not be told."

"That was right! I did say so. It was very kind of you to call only on purpose to see me. It was no other reason, was it?"

She gazed intently at him as she said this, raising herself upon her elbow, and leaning forward towards him as though in suspense. But he did not notice the peculiarity of her manner, and responded with a smile. He was slow at noticing some things.

"Certainly I had no other motive. Is not that good enough?"

"Bless you, my dear Charles! Yes, yes! And how do you like Harriet? Not a great deal, eh? You must have discovered her lack of accomplishments, perhaps, by the side of the young ladies you know, who have seen so much of society."

"I find her nothing of the kind," said Charles, bluntly. "We are all of us delighted with her, and hope you will let her stay a little longer."

"As long as—that is, yes, for a day or two; but if your mother finds her at all in the way, she must send her back at once. You will promise me this, will you not? And you will come and see me again—not tomorrow—some day when you can spare the time. This is a dull place to ask you to; but it is very kind of you to come."

He returned in three days' time, and she met him with the same eager look of dread, but he had only pleasant news for her—news, indeed, which brought hope and joy to her heart. He came under the pretense of seeing how she was getting on; but there was really no occasion to make the journey, as he had seen her doctor only an hour before. His other motive was to talk about Harriet. He did not say very much, and part of what he said was not exactly to the point; but the shrewder listener made this out of it—the heavy dragon had fallen in love with his pretty, pale-faced cousin. What the old lady said to him matters but little; she said it cleverly enough. There must be no hurry. He must not speak to Harriet until she had seen her. Would he drive her over next day? The good news had such an effect on the old lady that she insisted upon getting up and coming downstairs. Martha, her servant, coming to find her, found her sitting on the side of the bed, half laughing, half crying.

"Martha," she said, "it has come about as you said it would. Why did we not think of it before—long ago? But it seemed to me at first such a forlorn hope—yet it was by far the easiest and simplest way of warding off the exposure. Now, if the worst comes they will hush it up."

"But perhaps it can be warded off altogether, my dear, can it not?" the servant asked. "He will listen to reason. He didn't mean to be so hard on us as he said he would. If he had lived, we should have had no trouble, I feel sure of that."

"Yes—yes; if he had lived. But the other, who holds the bill? Will he be lenient too? Does he know its history? Will he hold it over till we can pay, or will he present it?"

"There, there, dear!" the old servant said, soothingly; "set your mind at rest for the present. Do not let us forever be looking upon the gloomy side of things. This is a glimpse of sunshine, surely. Let us make the most of it."

When Challice reached the hall, having made the journey at the highest speed of which his thoroughbred was capable, he found his mother waiting to welcome him. She knew where he had been, and with what object the visit had been undertaken; and looking upon her sister-in-law as a strange, eccentric and unaccountable kind of woman, thought that it was quite possible she might have thrown some obstacle in the way of this match, on which she knew her son's heart was set. It was a question whether she herself was so eager upon the subject, and whether she did not think that her darling boy, so handsome and so rich, might not have done better; but she had taken a great fancy to Harriet herself, and she loved her son, and would have given way to him in everything, however great the sacrifice might have been to her own feelings.

"I see it is all right, Charles," she said, with a gentle smile, and took his hand in hers.

"Where is Harriet?" he asked.

"I have not seen her for some little time;" and she turned to a servant and inquired where Miss Challice was.

"I saw Miss Challice walking down by the side of the lake about an hour ago, ma'am, with Captain Everest," the girl answered.

"Everest!" exclaimed Challice. "Is he here? That is famous! I thought he would not have been back for ever so long."

True to his promise, Challice did not speak of his love that day, and the next, at noon, drove his cousin over to East Haggelford. She was unusually thoughtful on the road. He fancied she was ill, perhaps, and forbore from bothering her. He thought it rather annoying, though, on this day, of all others.

She must have been unwell, or why should she have been so long upstairs? He strode impatiently to and fro from the dining-room below, and at length, weary of waiting, rambled out upon the terrace.

Wearied of waiting there, he came back to the room, and, on his way through the passage, heard the old woman's voice, shrilly-pitched and angry.

"And this is the end of all! You would let me be ruined . . . and for a foolish schoolgirl fancy! I say you must . . . You know all now . . . Do you hear?"

The unwilling listener below heard these broken sentences distinctly, and, staggering rather than walking into the dining-room, sank speechless with amazement into the nearest chair.

STEP II.

WHAT was the meaning of the words he had imperfectly heard? To whom were they addressed—to what did they refer?

It seemed scarcely credible that they should be spoken seriously. What dreadful mystery was there hidden here? What part was he destined to play in this strange drama, to the plot of which as yet he could get no clue?

He might probably, had he stayed to listen a few moments longer, have heard enough to set his mind at rest upon the several points that now perplexed him, but Charles Challice was a man of the nicest honor. He had been forced, against his will, to overhear a few disconnected sentences spoken, for something stronger than his will had held him spell-bound. Indeed, it would be difficult to describe the exact state of his feelings, and whether he was most shocked by what he had heard, or by the reflection that it had been obtained, as it were, in an underhand and unfair manner; and he asked himself how he could possibly explain the way in which he had come by the knowledge.

All at once, when the suspense he was suffering had reached a point when it was no longer endurable, he heard steps upon the stairs. The room door opened, and Mrs. Challice, radiant with smiles, led in her daughter Harriet. At the latter he looked inquiringly. She was pale, but, seemingly, no paler than usual. Perhaps her eyes might have faintly borne the traces of tears recently shed—but very faintly, though. His experience of such matters was not sufficient to enable him to come to any positive conclusion.

"My dear Charles," the old lady exclaimed, in her most impulsive manner, "you must forgive me for keeping you so long. I have been so very ill to-day. I get so worried and excited about nothing—absolutely nothing! I wish it were not so, but I cannot help it, and my poor head aches as though it would split. Well, well; that is enough of that! There is my dear child. Take her and be kind to her; but you will be that, I know."

The mother placed the daughter's hand in his, as she spoke; and it lay there passively, whilst she bent her eyes upon the ground.

He said nothing. The scene enacting before him seemed like a dream. He could scarcely believe that he himself was awake, and one of the most interested actors. Unless, after all, what he had fancied he heard was all a delusion. Surely it must have been so.

The old lady kept on talking—he did not know what about; something concerning the sacrifice she was making in parting with a child that had always been so dear to her—something respecting the mistake of long engagements. He nodded his head, and said "Yes" and "No" mechanically, at the places where it seemed necessary to do so, but he did not understand a word.

At last, after an interminable time, it appeared to him, she said she must leave them alone for awhile, and, to his unutterable relief, went away. When he found himself alone, placing his arm around her, he drew Harriet gently towards him, and began to speak in a low, earnest voice, and in tones which were slightly tremulous now and then, at others unnaturally deliberate, for he was struggling hard to appear calm and collected.

"My darling," he said, "I don't know what you will think of the question I am going to put to you, but I must ask it, for both our sakes—for the sake of your future happiness and mine. I think you must have seen that I loved you. I—I don't think I have a very good way of saying things and of making myself understood, as some fellows have; but if you can care for me, I'm sure I'll do everything in the world to make you happy—I'm sure I shall."

He paused here, without really having asked any question at all; but perhaps she thought it indicated sufficiently, and she said, "I have known you such a short time—have not I?—and your proposal was so sudden!"

"I was wrong in asking you so soon. I see that; and—perhaps you have been influenced?"

"Influenced?" she repeated, still looking on the ground.

"I thought that your mother, for some reason, I cannot say what, might have urged you to give your consent, and that a prior attachment—But if this were the case, darling, you would tell me—if you had ever given a promise to any other man?"

"A promise to any other man!" she cried, looking up at him with a wondering smile. "Oh, no! Why, I have been all my life at school! I have never loved anyone; I have not met with anyone; and you have all been so kind to me, how can I help being fond of you?"

He thought this over a moment. He was not very quick in coming to conclusions, as we have seen already; but somehow this answer seemed scarcely satisfactory.

"Fond!" he said. "Yes, but do you think you are fond enough—do you think you could get fond enough to marry me—some time? I have been in too great a hurry; but at your own time?"

"Yes," she said.

She raised her face towards him, and he bowed his

head and kissed her. Perhaps, after all, things were as satisfactory as could have been desired. He had made a good deal too much out of a few incoherent sentences, which probably meant nothing.

They presently drove back together, very happy, to the Hall. They did not talk very much about love, and perhaps Harriet found the drive home none the less agreeable upon that account. The topic of conversation upon which Charles could be most fluent—he was not very fluent upon any subject—was his horse, Flash o' Lightning. He talked about Flash o' Lightning all the way—about what it had done, and what he hoped it would do.

"I shall have put half my fortune on it before the year is out," he said; "and I'm backing it now as hard as I can while the prices are long. It's a strange thing, but the bookmakers, who think themselves so clever, cannot see what a horse he is. Wait till the St. Leger week, though, and then I'm much mistaken if they don't change their tune. I mean to get a good lump of money on before that. The blackguards perhaps don't think I mean to run him to win. Well, they'll see!"

It was quite true that Challice was backing his horse heavily—much too heavily, if the opinion of Mr. Midwinter, the family solicitor, went for anything; and surely it ought to have been worth while listening to, for he and his father and his grandfather before him had kept the Challice estates under their protecting wings, and had in their time done much to increase their prosperity.

The Challices, from time immemorial, had been a sporting family, and had hunted and bred horses, and occasionally ridden at steeplechases. Indeed, two Challices had thus broken their necks, but Charles Challice's father was the first to seriously take up with horse-racing. But although he had been the owner of some half-score of lucky cracks, he had managed to squander several thousands more than he made, in a not very lengthened career, and the son promised also to resemble his father in this respect.

As a man of honor, above any of the petty rogues which disgrace the generality of racing men, Charles Challice was highly esteemed by all men of honor connected with the turf. It could be safely said of him that he had never scratched a horse in his life, and that when he entered one for a race, he entered to run it to win; and his supporters knew that on the horse's own merits, and its master's good faith, they might, with equal certainty, place reliance.

He was not lucky, though. There are so many slips between the cup and the lip, particularly if it be a silver cup that is run for on a race-course.

Mr. Midwinter was most decidedly of that opinion, and not a few times shook his head solemnly, when he glanced over the sporting news in his daily paper, and read how Snapdragon, Early Worm, Flying Scud, or whatever the crack's name might be, which had likely enough been first favorite the day before, was not even placed. A part of Challice's frequent ill-luck may have had something to do with the long odds now being laid by the book-makers against his Flash o' Lightning.

Sporting men are a superstitious race, and they said, "Challice will win it if he can, but we'll lay you long odds that he doesn't."

Sometimes, too, when a horse's name was mentioned, the owner's name was asked. "He's one of Challice's, isn't he? Ah! I thought so! He's out of it, then!"

Harriet Challice, however, was not competent to form an opinion upon Flash o' Lightning's chances of success. She had seen the horse himself, and patted the satin-like skin of his arching neck. He seemed to her one of the most beautiful of living creatures. She devoutly believed her cousin to be a great and reliable authority upon all such matters, so when he spoke of Flash o' Lightning as the certain winner of next year's Derby, she looked upon the thing as good as settled.

"I wish it had been a mare!" Challice said, somewhat clumsily. "I'd have called it by your name. But you won't be jealous of him, will you? Next to you—you and my mother—I love nothing on earth so much as that horse. How quickly we've come along! It's talking, I suppose. In another moment we shall be at the park gates, and then we'll have to go in, I suppose."

He said this in a tone which seemed to imply that he would willingly have prolonged the drive, and at a word from her would have done so.

But she did not speak the word. Perhaps she did not understand him.

He whipped up the horses he was driving, and a rather discontented look passed over his countenance; but his expression changed again as he drew in the reins.

They were close to the lodge now; but sheltered from it by a thick hedge, over which the branches of some great elms spread outward, and cast a shadow upon the roadway.

"No one can see us here," he said, with an awkward abruptness, and a blush like a boy; and he awkwardly and whip in his right hand, and, leaning over to the left, encircled her with his strong arm, and kissed her wan cheek, which colored very faintly after the operation—principally, it would have seemed, because his closely-shaven beard had slightly rasped it.

Next moment, the sound of a horse's hoofs upon the gravel in the carriage drive was audible, and Captain Everest rode out and met them. The cheek that had not been kissed then flushed deeply, and turned deadly white again a moment afterwards.

Did Everest see what had happened? It was hardly possible, for he had turned the corner slowly, and, when they saw him, his eyes were fixed upon the ground. Did any one see this little love episode under the shadow of the elm's broad branches? No one in the world save a gipsy girl and an idiot gipsy boy; and the former pulled the latter by the sleeve, bidding him hold his peace, and not stir a muscle, but stare, if he thought fit, as hard as eyes could stare.

These two also saw Captain Everest come out, and

then it was the boy's turn to pluck at the girl's sleeve and point to him with an angry gesture; and the girl's gaze followed them with a curious expression, as the three, Challice, Everest, and Harriet, moved on together, Challice laughing and talking loudly, the other two silent.

STEP III.

THERE is a certain week in autumn-time when every year brings together such a mighty gathering of knaves and fools within the walls of a town called Doncaster, in the south-eastern part of the West Riding of Yorkshire, that those who are there to see might reasonably be excused for supposing that there can be no knaves or fools remaining anywhere else.

"Doncaster," says my Gazetteer—which is, I ought, perhaps, to mention, just thirty years behind the present date—"Doncaster," it says, "is a corporate town, with considerable funds, governed by a mayor, recorder, and common council. The principal street is about a mile in length. The Mansion House, in which the mayor and justices hold their sittings, is a spacious and elegant building. There is also a town hall, theater, dispensary, hospital, and two or three other public buildings; and the church, dedicated to St. George, is a noble edifice. Doncaster has five tan-yards, several flax-dressers, and some manufactories of sackings, carpets, sails, &c., and its trade in corn is considerable."

It will be observed with some astonishment, perhaps, by some of Doncaster's annual autumnal visitors, that there is, in the above, no allusion to the betting-rooms. The name of St. George's Church may come upon them as rather a surprise, and some will wonder whether it yet stands. The mayor is a dignitary whose existence they have been conscious of; some of the justices they have, may be, seen in the flesh, and listened to uneasily, over the top of a kind of pew, or pen, in close proximity to a watchful policeman; but that notion of trade being done in such things as sacking, carpet, nails, and corn is enough to make anyone laugh who always looked upon Doncaster as a place to book bets in, and eat and drink in after the day's races, and to sleep off (drink in before going to next day's races. Although there could be any other trade possible except that all-engrossing one of making bets!

We have nothing to do with the humdrum, everyday Doncaster, pottering over its ordinary commercial undertakings. It is now the Doncaster of the great race-week, and a mighty strange place it is.

The races are yet two days distant, but no end of people have come down. It is Sunday, but nobody particularly notices that, and would not notice it at all if it were not for the jangling of church bells now and then, for there is no inconvenient closing of taverns, everybody being a traveler and at liberty to indulge hard and fast.

A good deal of drinking is done, but not as much as shall be presently, when the races begin.

A circus and a wild beast show arrive, and the lion is heard to grumble to himself as he jolts along in his yellow traveling carriage. A company of burlesque ladies, with bronze-colored heads of hair, arrive by rail; and their wardrobe hampers, labeled boldly attract some notice from the curious, as do also the burlesque ladies, looking rather sallow and tumbled after their long journey, third class. The gentlemen accompanying this party are, for the most part, sallow and tumbled too, except one, who wears an Ulster, profusely befurred.

A monstrosity, as yet carefully hidden from public view comes also—a living skeleton, or a spotted boy; then two Punch and Judy men, two troupes of itinerant Ethiopians, a photographer, a stone-breaker, and a knife-swallower, who also does dreadful things to his eyes with a bit of tobacco-pipe; a number of gipsies, with Aunt Sallies, knock-'em-downs, &c.; and a half-drunken, half-crazy wretch, in a ragged huntsman's coat and one top-boot, who comes down for no particular reason, seemingly, but to scream discordantly about the streets night and day, and to be locked up, in the end, as a rogue and a vagabond.

The day before the race come a great crowd of arrivals, and the lodgings are snapped up everywhere at fabulous prices, twenty guineas being thought to be not too particularly dear for the hire of a first floor over a shop for the race week. Myriads of tight-legged, straddly men, a good many perpetually chewing bits of straw, come from all parts of the country, and stow themselves away at bedtime in an inscrutable fashion. Then, next day other myriads arrive, and are stowed away, too, so that the whole town must surely be packed with seething human life, as is the foul Chinese quarter at San Francisco. The next day, the grand day, all kinds of people make their appearance in the streets. There are heavy swells and brilliantly-attired ladies (the bronze burlesque ladies are brilliant by this time, and wondrously white and pink) and there is a goodly show of champagne and hampers packed with eatables to be eaten on the race-course.

There is a lot of drinking going on now. Neat brandy is drunk at breakfast-time, and at the chemists' shops, between ten and noon, quite a trade is being done in "pick me ups." Already a strange complaint makes its appearance after nightfall, afflicted with which men groan dismally, and dash their heads against walls, and try to fling themselves from the windows, or cut their throats, if not looked after carefully; and learned folks call this malady the horrors.

The largest part of the visitors, somehow or other, possess a curious kind of family likeness. Not in their dress—they are dressed in all kinds of fashions—but in their faces, in their cold, calculating faces, their square-cut, bull-dog jaws, and, in many instances, in their thin-lipped, cruel mouths. These are the men whose only trade is betting, from year's end to year's end. They have come here for the betting alone, and have done so year after year. They know nothing of, and

care nothing for, the Doncaster of any other week but that when the races are run; the same as they know nothing of Epsom or Newmarket, except when the races are on at either place.

In town they frequent certain quarters with persistent regularity, beginning the day with a "clean shave" at a sporting barber's, preceded, or followed, as fancy directs, by a "drop of rum and milk at a sporting pub," followed by drops of other liquors throughout the day, at the bars, or in the bar-parlors of innumerable houses of call, where they may be heard of by their clients, and where all manner of people, from seemingly sober-sided, middle-aged tradesmen to flashy fledglings, scarcely emerging from the shop-boy grub into the counter-skipper butterfly, seek them eagerly, and deposit in their safe keeping respectfully, diffidently, even, certain small sums which they are more or less capable of parting with if they lose.

In the middle of the day they lunch at sporting ordinaries, or stand at the bar of a sporting house, and pursue the same routine until dinner-time, and in the evening, perhaps, hang about the bars at the Victoria Station, or behind a long clay in a sporting pub parlor, solemnly sit the hours out until bed-time.

And throughout the whole day and night they talk of horses and odds, and dream of horses and odds; and then another day comes round, and, if it be not a race day, when they must go down to the course, their life will be the same—a dreadfully monotonous and wearisome life, as it seems to me, which ought to be very profitable to be enduring.

They are not, however, necessarily all thin-lipped, hard-faced, cold-eyed men these I have been describing. Many seem good-natured, and look fresh and rosy. Some have fat, flushed cheeks and sensual mouths, indicative of a love of good things of all sorts; but there is the same selfish, unfeeling look about them all, slightly veiled sometimes, occasionally almost entirely hidden, but always there—always existing.

But surely no possible resemblance exists between these distinct classes of racing men and Mr. Trueman, the East Haggleford surgeon, who had come to Doncaster in the same train with Charles Challice, and who sat smoking his cigar in the parlor of the "Angel Inn," on the Tuesday of the race-week, as bright and beaming a doctor with sporting proclivities as ever the sun set upon.

He was a sporting doctor, who pretty regularly attended every race of importance, leaving his patients meanwhile to get on as best they could, which they did, as a rule, without very much grumbling, perhaps because his paying patients were few in numbers, and the country round about East Haggleford starvily healthy from a resident doctor's point of view.

The talk in the "Angel" parlor that evening was sporting talk, of course, and much drinking having gone on for some time past, the talk was loud and confident, but a little wild, perhaps.

"What is this horse of Challice's he has brought down here?" some one asked. "Has he done anything, does any one know?"

"He was a bad second the only time I saw him run," said some one else.

"And a pretty good first for the Criterion Handicap," said the doctor, quietly.

"It was by the greatest fluke in all the world he won it," a youthful authority hiccupped out. "It's always by a fluke Challice pulls anything off."

"I don't quite follow you there," said a hard-headed, weather-beaten man, sitting aloof, and puffing hard at his "yard of clay." "Challice runs to win; and there's never no plant, nor kid, nor fakement about his doings; and some of these days, mark me, he will win a big thing, too, and then—oh, my!—there'll be gnashing of teeth somewhere round the corner, where the book-makers are."

"If he'd only his wits about him, couldn't he make a mint o' money?" said the young man, after a pause. "After he'd pulled off the good thing you speak of—that would be the time!"

"Ah, but that time won't never come, young sir—mark my words if it does; so don't you risk no more of your blessed ha'pence on the event nor you can well afford to part with. Take my straight tip, so far."

With these words, the hard-headed one rose slowly, and with great deliberation knocked the ashes out of his pipe into the little ash tray, picking up a stray pinch that fell beyond the edge very carefully. He then nodded in a meaning way to the general company, and smiled knowingly, but almost imperceptibly, at the sporting doctor, and strode out of the room.

"By Jove!" cried the young fellow, whose remark had called forth the hard-headed one's prophetic utterances; "that's Challice's trainer, old Joe Barkins, and none other!"

"I don't think you're very far out there, sir," said the sporting doctor; "and I don't think I am far out when I say that it would be a bad spec for anyone who tried to play any larks with one of Charley Challice's cracks. This horse of his he has got down here is the right sort, every inch of him; and as certain as ever I sit in this chair, he'll come in first for the Champagne Stakes, to-morrow, unless there's some foul play. And as to that, why the place is too carefully looked after; there isn't a chance for it!"

"Chance or no chance," cried the young man, who before had aired his superior sagacity, "I'll lay you fifty to one in sovs against him!"

"I'll take you!" said the doctor, producing his betting book with great alacrity; "though the market price would have done quite well enough."

There was a general laugh at the young sporting man's expense, but it was followed soon after by offers on all sides to lay reasonable odds against Challice's horse; and the doctor, booking several of these, protested that he was only in a small way himself, and as it was, stood to lose a good stiff sum for a man only

middling well off, and he put up his book, and bade the company good-night.

When he passed through the door of the "Angel" into the street, the doctor, with a slight shudder, turned up his coat collar and buttoned his coat across his breast. A sharp, biting wind was just now raking the corporate town of Doncaster fore and aft, which some of its visitors found to be refreshing, and took their hats off to; but the others did not care for it at all, and crept away round every possible angle, in fruitless endeavors to avoid.

It could not have been an extra shrill blast of the wind, though, which brought the doctor to a sudden standstill within a dozen yards of the hotel-door, and caused him to glance cautiously to the right and left.

From the shadow of a wall a thick-set figure emerged, and coughed to draw the doctor's attention.

"Well," Dr. Trueman said, "are you ready to try it?"

"Yes."

"Who have you with you?"

"No one. I am game to risk it."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"All the more swag for your share, then, my friend, eh? Well, you're a pluck't 'un, there's no doubt of that!"

"You'd better say I'm down on my luck now, and can't afford to be over particular."

"I take it you're not among the timidest at any time. Well, you know where to find me when it's done?"

"I'll be there."

"Good-night, for the present."

"For the present, good-night."

The wind sighed mournfully as it swept past through the street, momentarily dark and deserted. Then the door of a tavern hard by was flung suddenly and violently open, and the drunken lunatic with the ragged huntsman's coat and the one top boot was hurled headlong forth, wildly stretching out his arms to save himself, and came crashing down in the middle of the road, to writhe and wriggle like an over-gorged leech, and flop back hopelessly, after impotent efforts to get into an upright position once again, and return to the tavern, clamoring for more drink.

With the opening of the door a burst of discordant harmony and brutal laughter came forth with the helpless, besotted creature the landlord had caused to be expelled; and as the door closed again, it died away as suddenly.

Then the street was once more dark and quiet.

STEP IV.

On leaving the hotel, old Joe Barkins betook himself to the stable where the vaunted horse Flash o' Lightning was safely stowed away. It stood at some distance from any other habitation, and was an old erection, built of stone, with massive walls and stout oaken doors. It had a thatched roof, and above the three stalls, one at present occupied by the horse, and another by a large, savage dog, was an awkwardly-shaped loft, in which Jack Jacks, the jockey, and old Barkins slept by turns—always one of the two, however, keeping strict watch over Challice's favorite.

As he approached the building across the paddock, almost in the center of which it stood, he saw the door open, and a bright light pouring forth, and he got up in time to see Challice himself coming out.

"Ah, there you are, Barkins!" said the young squire. "I just came over to have a last look at you before going to bed."

"We're in first class condition, sir, ain't we?"

"Nothing could be better. How are the odds?"

"Well, it's about the same old tale, sir. Drat me if I can christen it! You could get pretty near what you chose to ask."

"That's it, is it?"

"Yes; but we'll surprise them, I fancy."

"Not a doubt of it, if we try; but 'pon my word, sir, said the trainer," sinking his voice, "in your place, I'd not let little Jacks give him all his head to-morrow—I wouldn't, indeed. If he is to run for the Derby, see the price he'd be at after it! How's your book, sir? Can't it be done somehow, and let you down easy?"

"Barkins," said Challice, with a passionate burst, "if any other man alive had ventured to say half as much, I'd have knocked him down! But you mean well, I know. It would serve those vagabonds right, there's no doubt of that; but I'll leave it to others to play the cheat. I never yet heard of a Challice who was called a knave, and I won't be the first. I'd rather be ruined ten times over. Do you mark that!"

"Mr. Challice, sir," broke in the trainer, in great trouble, "'pon my word, I was more than half in jest when I spoke. It was the senseless cackle I heard up town yonder put the thought into my head. It was enough to make any man beside himself. But you'll think no more of it, sir, I hope?"

"No, no. Good night."

Challice stooped over his horse's side, and shook the trainer by the hand, and rode briskly on.

Old Joe Barkins had accompanied his companion to the gate of the paddock, and stood in the road beyond when Challice had ridden away, looking after him.

"Joe!" said a voice,

He looked up, and saw Dr. Trueman.

"Doctor, is that you?"

"Yes; I tried to overtake you. I just stopped to book a few more bets on the horse. He's all right for to-morrow, I hope. If he doesn't pull it off I don't quite know where I'll be."

"Oh, he's as right as the mail! But"—

"What's amiss, Joe? You seem out of sorts."

"Oh, it's nothing—a word or two I had with the master—about nothing, too. He misunderstood me."

"Take half a turn back with me, Joe, and let's have a glass."

"No, thank'ee, sir; no more to-night."

"What nonsense! I'm a doctor, ain't I? I ought to know what to prescribe. Look there, there's a place open at the corner. A nip of brandy will do you no harm."

THE SIXTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH THE WORLD COMES TO AN END.

- STEP I.—A CLOCK STRIKES TWELVE.
 " II.—AGONY OF PIDGEON.
 " III.—AGONY OF MRS. PEG.
 " IV.—THE HATCHET-FACED MAN.

STEP I.

TEAT Doctor Trueman was one of the most amusing men, when he thought fit to exert his social talents. No wonder the two minutes Old Joe meant to pass over his glass of grog extended to fifteen, and swelled imperceptibly into twenty-five.

It was a good half-hour before, looking up at the clock he suddenly exclaimed, "Little Jacky will be out of patience."

Little Jacky was out of patience—there was no doubt about that; but the doctor laughed at the notion of there being any hurry, and so two more glasses were ordered, and sipped leisurely, and then—

And then two more glasses after that.

"Just one more, Old Joe; and then I really must be off to bed!" the doctor then exclaimed, in a tone of voice that seemed to imply that Joe had been keeping him, not he Joe. "Just one more glass—a small glass—to drink success to the Squire's crack. There—you can't refuse that, if you mean fair!"

"Mean fair!" replied Old Joe, shaking his head—for he only vaguely caught at the other's meaning. "I'd rather like to come across anyone who did not mean the Squire fair. It would go hard with him, even if he were double my fighting weight."

"I'm certain sure of that, Old Joe," said the doctor, slapping him on the back. "You'll take care of the Squire's interests, if anyone will!"

But just at that moment, surely Old Joe would have been better taking care of them had he been keeping watch with Jacky in the stable.

"Joe's a longish while gone," muttered Jacky Jacks, reflectively. "It's not the straight thing hardly to keep a fellow up so late when he's got to be in the saddle next day. I'm awfully sleepy!"

A low growl from the dog caught his ear.

"That's Joe come back, I suppose. Lie down, you brute! Haven't you learnt the sound of Joe's boots by this time?"

But seemingly the dog had not acquired this knowledge properly, or the boots he heard might not, after all, have belonged to old Joe.

Anyhow, when the jockey went to the door and looked out, no signs of the trainer were visible.

The night was very dark upon the country side, but there was a faint redness in the sky over the town, and a dull murmur in the air. The gallant sportsmen, then, had not yet gone to bed.

A church clock struck twelve.

All about the stable was very dismal. The creaking of the branches of a lightning-struck tree overhanging the stable had a dismal sound. Jacky Jacks peeped about him, and returned to the stable, hastily closing the door after him.

The dog still growled.

"There's no one lurking about, surely!" the jockey said. "I wish old Joe would come back. Whew! how cold it is!"

It was cold enough without, but inside it was very warm; and he had not taken his seat more than five minutes when he began to grow desperately drowsy. But the dog, with a succession of loud, fierce barks, made him open his eyes wide.

Looking, then, in the direction in which the outstretched muzzle of the dog was turned—in the direction of the stable window—he saw an ugly visage peeping in at him through the beared glass.

"Hallo, there! Who are you?" cried the jockey, springing to his feet in a great fright. "Who are you?—what do you want?"

The owner of the ugly visage did not stop to answer the question, but instantly disappeared.

Jacky felt awfully uncomfortable. He fetched a pistol from a distant corner of the stable, where it hung on a nail, and, with trembling fingers, cocked it. Then he stood irresolute, staring at the window through which the face had appeared. Perhaps, had it come back again, he might have instantly fired at it, without a thought of the possible consequences of such an act.

But it did not appear. The window remained black as pitch, and he was so terribly frightened by this suspense, he felt the face's return would have been a relief.

But as it did not show itself again, his breath began to come back instead, and with it his courage, which had all oozed away in the first moment of terror; and he then made up his mind to light the lantern, and, with the pistol in his hand, to sally forth upon a tour of inspection round the building.

All was dark and silent without, as upon the first occasion; and Jacky, holding the lantern on high, advanced cautiously and slowly round the angle of the wall.

But scarcely had he turned the corner when the lantern was dashed from his hand, and the light extinguished, whilst he himself received a staggering blow on the shoulder—a blow which was probably intended to have caught him under the ear.

A pistol is not always the deadliest weapon in a

frightened man's hand, and Jacky dropped his directly. It fell, somehow, softly on the grass, and though at full cock, did not explode.

He turned, then, and grappled with his assailant, and shouted, "Help! help!" with all his might.

To his unutterable relief, another shout was heard in answer, and old Joe came hurrying up.

Though, however, they both contended with the unwelcome stranger, and struggled desperately to hold him, it was impossible.

With well-directed blows right and left, he hurled his assailants from him, and though they closed with him again, he once more beat them off, and, taking to his heels, fled like the wind.

They went in pursuit as far as the hedge of the paddock, over which the man vaulted as easily as a deer would have done, and then they drew up for want of breath, and, after a brief consultation, determined to return again to the stable.

They struck a match first, however, and relit the lantern. The pistol lay peacefully where it had fallen, without a cap, at which old Joe smiled; but near to it was something that neither smiled at, and Jacky raised from the ground with an exclamation of terror.

"See here, now!"

"The atrocious scoundrel!"

"That's what he meant, then, if he could have got inside, and got us both out of the way!"

The thing that excited the two was a little packet of sharp pieces of steel, much like needles, only stronger, and without any eyes.

The two went back into the stable; carefully examined the interior, to see that no one had concealed himself there during the struggle; and they then not only bolted and locked the door very carefully, but strongly barricaded the window with two stout planks nailed across.

"He'd all a nerve, that fellow!" said Jacky, seating himself when these precautions had been taken. "He meant to have got in somehow, and lamed the horse's foot. But how about the dog?"

"Perhaps he had some physic for that," said old Joe, yawning, "to make it quiet. But it would have taken him all his time. He might as easily have tried to— to drug me."

"Hold up, old man!" cried Jacky, in alarm, for the trainer was butting headlong at the lantern. "What do you think you're doing on?"

The trainer sat up and pressed his hand to his forehead.

"I don't know, Jacky," he said in a dreamy tone; "I feel very queer!"

"Have you been drinking?"

"Nothing to speak of. I'd a pint of ale at the 'Angel,' and two fours of hot rum just now with Doctor True-man. That's not enough to floor a man of my kind, is it?"

"Not likely! Are you sure you did not have any more?"

"Quite sure, Jacky. I feel deuced bad!"

"Here, lie down on the straw. You're no good at all. I'll keep awake and watch. Lean on me, will you? There! Hold up! That's right! Keep quiet there."

Old Joe having tottered to the corner indicated, subsided upon the straw more like a bundle of old clothes than a man, and almost instantly was snoring loudly.

Jacky Jacks sat bolt upright, and desperately wide awake, and scratched his head.

"There's no mistake about it!" said he, aloud. "Some one's got a spite against the gov'nor! Well, I'm game for one, come what may! I ain't a pluckt 'un as pluckt 'uns go, but I'm in for it, and I don't mean to turn tail! Afore any harm comes to the horse, they'll have to get rid of me! Let 'em look out!"

He cocked the pistol again, this time taking care to see that it had a cap on it. Then he sat himself down again, bolt upright as before, and made up his mind to watch through the night, and do deadly things to all invaders.

The day breaking gray and grim found him still at his post, watchful and resolute. Jacky Jacks was not, perhaps, a worse coward than some others amongst us who crow loudly.

By daybreak there were signs of life near at hand, and Jack, opening the stable door, called loudly to a passer-by, and with his aid sent a message to Mr. Challice.

Like quicksilver, though, the tidings that there had been an attack upon Flash o' Lightning's stable ran over the town, with all kinds of wild exaggerations. It was currently reported that the horse had been actually lamed, and the odds against him multiplied rapidly. The sporting doctor was one of the first to avail himself of this circumstance, and backed Flash o' Lightning fast and furiously. He stood to win a largish sum before midday.

Some blank faces were to be found among the crowd, as Challice's crack passed slowly over the course, preparatory to the race. There was intense blackness, and the longest possible long faces, later on, when the race was run, and Flash o' Lightning, far ahead of all competitors, came with a rush past the winning post, and the cheers of the winners did not anything like drown the groans and curses of those who had been badly betting.

An ugly rumor went over the course.

"It's all been a plot," someone said.

"Impossible! An honorable man like Challice would never stoop to anything so black!"

"He's not done badly by it," chuckled an unbeliever. The doctor, standing by, was silent, and smiled knowingly.

You ought to have backed Flash o' Lightning," he said, and turned on his heel.

Everest was the first to tell Challice what was being said.

"Great heaven!" the latter exclaimed. "It cannot be true that they think this?"

"It is too true. They are saying it everywhere."

Challice ground his teeth in bitter rage.

"Charley, you must take things quietly."

"Good gracious, man, how you talk! It is impossible to me—do you understand?—to live under such a suspicion!"

"Nonsense—nonsense! Do calm yourself! What need you care for what a lot of blacklegs and thieves may say or think?"

"But they do both—not openly, I suppose. They dare not do that?"

"You must take a notice of it yet. We must think over what is the best thing to do."

Challice then drew up short.

"What am I to do?" he said.

Everest was chewing the end of a cigar that had gone out some time ago. He gave a long, long whistle.

"I'm not quite clear as to that yet," said he.

"What should I do?" repeated Challice. "The low blackguards! How dare they?"

Everest pressed him back.

"Keep quiet, Charlie," he said; "your friends do not believe a word of it; rest assured of that. We must land the rascal who did this bit of villainy. Can you give us no clue?"

"None in the world."

"The scoundrel must have owed you some grudge."

"One would think so, but I don't remember injuring anyone enough for that."

"Well, never mind; we'll find out, somehow, before long."

"I must not rest till we have done so. And now don't let us talk any more about it. By the way, did you win?"

"No; I did not bet."

"What! you put nothing on my horse?" asked Challice, rather surprised.

"Well, I put nothing on any horse. You know, old fellow, I have not much cash to bet with—none to lose—and I—"

"How do you mean?"

"You remember the story I told you about my income arriving mysteriously every three months, do you not?"

"Yes."

"And that it always came to the very day?"

"I remember well."

"This time it is two days behind the time. I take it my income from that source is at an end. I must work for my living now, like other people, or live by my wits."

STEP II.

THE world was at an end.

There could be no doubt about that, for the point had long ago been satisfactorily decided by Mrs. Patience Clark, the oldest inhabitant of East Hagglesford.

Yes; the world was at an end, and the way of its coming to an end was this:

From what small beginnings are many stupendous achievements brought about! One day, just such a day as to-day might be, or yesterday, a day with really nothing remarkable about it, two strange men came down to East Hagglesford with a black leather bag, and a three-legged instrument of mysterious import, and began to walk about in the fields, and take, what someone said afterwards, with more or less truth, were "sights" and "surveys." The impression getting into the head of a small farmer, who found the two strange men and the three-legged instrument in the center of one of his fields, that they were taking liberties, if not turnips, he yelled at them furiously from his side of the hedge, and threatened them with his horsewhip.

The strange men, however, did not seem to be much frightened; they were used to angry small farmers, perhaps, so they did not hurry themselves very much in finishing what they were doing; and afterwards deliberately packed up their apparatus, the small farmer on the other side of the hedge foaming away all the while.

A few days after this, a troupe of mud-stained giants, carrying picks and spades, came tramping up the village high street, under the guidance of another strange man, not so roughly dressed, and began to cut down hedges, and fell trees, in a manner that took people's breath away. In a week's time, a row of posts, beginning in the high street itself, and stretching over the meadows far away, indicated the route which the railway was to come through East Hagglesford, and the exact spot where there was to be a red and yellow brick station, wonderfully like sweetstuff, if the design exhibited at Em Pember's were properly carried out. And the railway was to pass by the other Hagglesford altogether.

It took some time for the East Hagglesfordians to fully realize this wondrous event, and it completely stunned poor old Mrs. Patience Clark. When, however, the full truth pierced through the outward thicknesses of the thickest-headed East Hagglesfordian, he broke into a broad grin, and smote his thigh with a sounding thwack.

"Heart alive!" said he. "It's East Hagglesford's turn this time! They've had it most any way they liked over yonder up to now."

That the future of East Hagglesford was to be quite another thing from its past, soon became evident. Another troupe of laborers arrived, and then another, and another. Two or three rows of hideously ugly yellow brick cottages sprang up like mushrooms, in which

the new arrivals took up their abode, almost before the mortar had set, and the plaster hardened; and then a little population of women and children put in an appearance.

It was also evident that now or never was the time—that, whilst the iron was hot, the blow should be struck—that, whilst the sun shone, the hay should be made—and, indeed, the only question was how. To tell the truth, the East Hagglesfordians had somehow thoroughly settled down by this time into a steady-going, comfortable kind of grumble at the hardness of their lot, and being bettered all at once with so much violence rather annoyed them than otherwise.

It put Miss Em Pember out a good deal, because, although a bold navigator would often spend more money in a night than one of her regular customers did in a week, he was loud and noisy, sometimes violent, and generally objectionable. Miss Pember's whole stock of brown earthenware mugs were smashed to pieces before a fortnight had passed over her head. Not feeling quite equal to the management of these burly savages, single-handed, and objecting, upon principle, to male assistance inside the house, Miss Pember hit upon the original idea of refusing to allow the new-comers to drink upon the premises at all; and so, very naturally, some one from a neighboring town came down, and opened an alehouse by the name of the "Fox under the Hill," where a roaring trade was done, whilst Miss Pember kept herself to herself, and went on starving genteelly.

Again, as to Mrs. Pegg, who kept the provision store. Mrs. Pegg was not happy. The new arrivals had ways of dealing which did not enter into her philosophy. They wanted to pay for goods on Saturday which they consumed on the previous Monday; and Mrs. Pegg regarded them as birds of passage, and birds of more than doubtful plumage—had no faith in them, and refused trust. Was it to be wondered at, then, if a friend of the vile interloper who opened the "Fox under the Hill," should have come and started a rival provision store, taking the first of a row of brand-new shops to do it in?

Mrs. Pegg, who, through her life, had always given credit to East Hagglesfordians, most of whom were deep in her debt, and never likely to get out of it, then somehow began to think she had missed a chance, but would not own it.

Worst of all things went with poor Pidgeon the East Hagglesford barber. The sudden rush of beards that flooded Pidgeon's premises shook him to the foundation, as it were, and carried him clean off his legs. The first day the place was so crowded he had no room to wield his razor, and, jolted and jostled on all sides, did some pretty chipping and chopping among his new customers. He was never a very quick shaver, and the navigators' beards were of a porcupine nature he had no previous experience of. A willing but weakly youth, pressed into the service hurriedly, lathered with profusion a row of expectants, but the soap dried and caked upon their jaws before he got round to them; and some rubbed the soap off, and went their way cursing; and others (the worse for liquor) went away with the soap on, swearing loudly and with the same fluency as the sober ones. Some borrowed Pidgeon's razors and notched them.

Under these circumstances, it really surprised nobody very much (except Pidgeon) that a friend of the friend of the miscreant who opened the "Fox under the Hill" should have come down and opened No. 2 shop in that wretched row already alluded to, bringing with him two muscular assistants, and, though a native of Whitechapel, calling himself a "coiffeur de Paris," and advertising that he dressed ladies' hair in the "latest fashion." It was in his window that the very first chignon that ever was seen in East Hagglesford was exposed for sale!

If anything were wanting in poor Pidgeon's cup of bitterness after he had seen this rival barber open his shop, and stand straddle-legged and triumphant on the threshold thereof, it was the knowledge that he had actually had that man under his razor a week previously, and had not severed his head from his body!

Such was, however, the case—I mean, he had shaved the new-comer, and had found him to be a pleasant-spoken, glib personage, with no affectation for his about him; and entering into conversation concerning things generally, pumped poor Pidgeon quite dry with regard to the extent of his business and the nature of his customers, the unhappy barber telling him everything he wanted to know, and more.

When later on, he learnt that this man was no better than a spy, who, under false colors, had sneaked into the camp, his fury was immense. Everything about the rival barber offended him—even his name, which was Rook—a ridiculously exasperating thing when his own name happened to be Pidgeon! The rustic mind found evergreen fun in this little circumstance, and made clumsy jokes about it many times a day.

But perhaps what hurt poor Pidgeon worst of all was that the new barber came between him and Em Pember, with whom he (Pidgeon) had kept company in a kind of simmering heat, never quite ready to boil over, for some years at least.

But one day, when he found out that Em Pember had had her hair cut at the opposition shop, he bubbled up suddenly, threw aside his apron, put his Sunday go-to-meeting high hat on, and crossed the road.

Miss Pember was behind the bar, doing needlework to pass the time away, and leaving off now and then to gaze upward thoughtfully at half a salted pig hanging between the beams, and serving as a monster playground for the flies.

"Good day, Miss Pember!" he said.

"Good day, Mr. Pidgeon," she answered, without rapture.

Then a pause ensued.

"Miss Pember!" said he.

"Well—what?"—(this not a bit rapturous).

"I don't think love's a thing to be hurried, Miss Pember," said Pidgeon, going blindfold and head first into the subject nearest his heart.

"Certainly not," she replied. "Who said it was?"

"I was thinking, Miss Pember," he went on, "that, though what you've just observed is perfectly true, and right straight against moral contradiction, that a time ought to be fixed—in due course, of course, and at your leisure."

"Do you mean, Mr. Pidgeon, a time when we two should get married?"

"Well, Miss Pember, as you have said the word—"

"Now, Mr. Pidgeon, I should like, once for all—that there may be no silly misunderstanding afterwards, don't you see?—for you to be quite aware, now, that it is generally thought to be necessary, before one marries a person, to try and love that person a little, somehow; and I can't say at the present moment, that I love you anyhow!"

"Oh, Miss Pember!" gasped poor Pidgeon; there's only one way of loving, is there?"

"There are several ways of not loving!"

"Eh?" exclaimed Pidgeon.

"For instance, you might only be indifferent to me."

"Ah!" cried Pidgeon.

"Or you might only be unbearably hateful!"

"Oh!" cried Pidgeon.

"But you are simply wearisome, which is worse than all!"

"I wearisome!" Pidgeon gasped. "I—I, who would shave my head, almost, to please you?"

"If you would please me most," retorted the cruel-hearted Em Pember, "don't stop bothering here any longer!"

"I didn't think this of you, Miss P—P—Pember!" cried the blighted barber, dropping a tear into his mild ale. "Things haven't gone well with me lately. I've had a deal to bother me, but I've looked across the road to you, as it were, as to my guiding star! I've often thought of you when, perhaps, I was miles away from your thoughts. There's other hairdressers in the world besides me, and some, perhaps, that uses finer words, and don't mean as much! Well, there are other places in the world besides East Haggford. There's New Zealand or Jamaica. Do you think you would ever come to think of me any kinder, Miss Pember, if I was far, far away?"

"I think I should like you better far away!" she answered provokingly.

"And suppose I never came back?" said poor Pidgeon in piteous accents.

"I think I should like that most!" retorted Miss Pember, and broke into the most musical laugh you ever heard in your life, which had, at the same time, the most jarring, jangling sound to the wretched barber's ears he ever remembered; and he retreated in a molten rage, leaving his glass three-parts full.

STEP III.

Mrs. Pegg found him some time later sitting despondently in his empty shop, and he appeared to have been weeping.

"Mrs. Pegg," he said, "come in, ma'am. I should like to ask you a question. You have noticed for some time past, haven't you, that there has been something between me and Miss Pember?"

"I have noticed a something, I fancy."

"It's all off now!"

"You have my heartiest commiseration, Mr. Pidgeon; though she's a false-hearted woman, if ever there was one; and you'll not catch me asking favors of the likes of her for some time to come, or I'm much mistaken!"

"Oh, she's behaved bad to you then, has she?"

"Well, I don't mind telling you, Mr. Pidgeon, being such near neighbors, as it were. You see, I had a bill with that Mr. Benson, who died here sudden, in a fit, three months ago; and what with the state of trade, and one thing and another, am not quite prepared to meet it; so fancying she might have a little put by I asked her—"

"And she hadn't?"

"If she had, she would not part with it; and unless I find some kind friend—"

"I'm very glad you spoke to me, indeed, Mrs. Pegg," said Pidgeon; "and I take it as neighborly."

"Oh, Mr. Pidgeon, it's too good of you; but I never could have dreamt of asking—"

"I think neighbors ought to be neighborly," pursued Mr. Pidgeon, ignoring this last interruption; "and as far as lies in their power to help one another—"

"Just what I say," put in Mrs. Pegg.

"And if I had the money to lend," pursued Mr. Pidgeon, "you wouldn't have to ask me twice for it, ma'am, you may rely on that. Unfortunately, though, I haven't, and am, instead, just in the same position as yourself. I have a bill with Mr. Benson too, and it falls due this very day."

Mrs. Pegg looked rather blue on receipt of this intelligence.

"Do you think, now, as Mr. Benson is dead, we may never be asked for the money at all?"

"Not a chance of such good luck," Pidgeon replied. "His heirs will be down on us, of course; they hold the bills."

"But he hasn't got any. It came out at the inquest, he hadn't a relation in the world."

"Ah!" rejoined Mr. Pidgeon, wagging his head wisely; "we shall have to pay, that's certain. Think, now, if I'd only had the luck to drop on my bill by accident, as I did on the pocketful of gold and notes! I'd have made short work of it, ma'am, fair or unfair; but, of course, he'd posted it up to town, to that friend in the

City he was always talking of—him that used to stick it on so."

"Mr. Benson never mentioned his name, did he?"

"I never heard it; but we shall see the man himself, mark my words, before very long."

"We can't dispute his claim, I suppose? As we gave the bills, it was clear we owed the money, and we owe it still to the holder of the bills."

"You couldn't say a truer word than that, Mrs. Pegg. The holder of the bill has it all his own way. There are any number stolen every day of the year, I am told, and the thief passes it on to another, and another to another, and the last one's the innocent holder, and he swears he gave value for it; and you have to pay all the same, just as if you really owed the money."

"It's a dreadful thing is the law, ain't it, Mr. Pidgeon? If Mr. Benson's friend won't renew, goodness only knows what'll ever become of me!"

"We're not the only ones in the town in the same fix—that's one comfort, any way!" said Mr. Pidgeon.

"It's a silly thing to put one's hand to paper, ain't it? Has it ever occurred to you, ma'am, how a money-lender conjugates the verb to lend? He serves you in the present tense, don't he? Then he does your bill in the conditional mood. When he has done it, he keeps you in the subjunctive, and sooner or later he sells you up in the future."

STEP IV.

SURE enough, that friend of Mr. Benson's was not far off; and, even as they spoke, he was coming across the meadow from the direction of the other Haggford, swinging a small cane jauntily, and puffing at a cigar.

Among the few things which had not in some shape been altered by the arrival of the railway people was that old stile on which, at the beginning of this story, a certain care-worn, hatchet-faced man took his seat, and gazed complacently down upon the happy village.

Mr. Benson's city friend was, curiously enough, a care-worn, hatchet-faced man also, but he was not so ragged, and did not look nearly so hungry.

He was strikingly like the other hatchet-faced man, though. His hat was cocked on one side; he had a flower in his button-hole, and wore a soiled, light kid glove, and he thought aloud like the other man. Bah! Why bother you longer? He was the other man, come back with all the effrontery in the world to the place where he had met with such a warm reception.

"Here we are again!" said he to himself, as he sat there puffing his cigar and swinging his leg. "But how the place seems to have changed! The 'Blue Dragon' looks something like the same, and so does the barber's shop and the everything shop next door; but where's the old bridge and the mill-stream they ducked me in? By Jove, it's dried up! That's retribution!"

He laughed at this, and having finished his cigar, lit another.

"If my memory serves me, I began the world three months ago with the best intentions and fourpence-halfpenny. I have that double-headed halfpenny still. By steadily adhering to the path of rectitude, I find myself much happier, and I am also the possessor of a little capital."

He took his money out, and counted it as he spoke; it amounted to nineteen shillings, inclusive of a doubtful fourpenny-bit and the famous double-headed copper coin; and he put it back again into his pocket, with a smile.

"If I go on at the same rate," said he, "and still continue in the right path, I sha'n't take much over forty years to save up a hundred pounds. The question is, shall I pursue my virtuous career or not? I think not. Let me see, now!"

He produced a pocket-book containing a number of papers, and turned them over carefully.

"Flutter, little innocents!" he said, as the wind gently rustled them. "The worthy soul you rightly belonged to set half the town in a tremble when he shook you in the folks' faces. Why shouldn't I?"

He spoke no more aloud; but, with knitted brows, sat thinking out for the thousandth time to plan of action open to him. Why should he not himself present the bills? Who saw him take them? No one. Could not they have come into his hands in the ordinary course of business? Why not? Who knew anything of Benson's transactions? Was anyone likely to risk the expense of disputing Deverel's claim to them? It was not feasible.

The old man appeared to have had no relations in the world. That was the great point. The ex-dancing master slapped his leg, and sprang to his feet.

"I'll do it!" he cried.

With these words, he walked straight into the "Blue Dragon" parlor, and rang the bell. Miss Em Pember answered the ring, and stared at him wonderingly, then wistfully, as a faint recollection of his features dawned on her.

"What do you please to want, sir?" she asked.

"To dine, if you have no objection."

"We do not usually serve dinners, and—yes, it is—and certainly not to you! Come, now, my fine fellow, suppose you give them a turn at some other house?"

"You haven't forgotten me, then," he said, coolly. "I'm glad of that. See here; here is the amount of your little bill. Circumstances impressed it upon my memory. Are you busy? If not, perhaps you will favor me with a few moments' conversation."

"What do you want?" she asked, a little mollified, but still doubtful.

"A hundred and sixty-eight pounds. This is your promissory note, I believe, given to the late Mr. Benson, and duly endorsed by him?"

"Ye-es, it is; and you are?"

"As you see, the holder. Shall I wait here while you fetch the money? I wish you would send me in a glass of your best ale."

Em Pember stood irresolute, nervously twitching the hem of her apron.

"I never supposed, sir, that"—

"Of course not. How could you?"

"With respect to this little matter, sir, I'm very sorry to say—very sorry indeed, but I have had a very bad season, and been put to some expense repairing the roof and drains, and the fact is— But I understood from Mr. Benson that I might renew it again on the old terms."

And as she spoke, she put down ten bright guineas.

Deverel's eyes sparkled, but he showed no other signs of excitement. On the contrary, he pushed the money towards her.

"No, no," said he; "I'm very sorry, but I can't do it. The fact is, I don't care much for these kind of bills; they were more in Benson's way than mine. I prefer regular trade transactions, you know—everything straightforward and bona fide."

"But if you could only give me a little time, sir—if I paid some extra—"

And she placed another pound upon the table.

"After what happened last time we met, sir, perhaps you would not care to serve me?"

"Ah, you allude to the mill-stream," said he, carelessly. "Well, I don't bear malice. I don't like these bills, as I said; but there, make me out another for three months. Put 'Richard Deverel'—D-e-v-e-r-e-l—in the place of 'Benson.' That's all the difference."

She fetched the pen and ink from the side table, and wrote out the new bill at his dictation; then he gave her the old one and took the money.

"You said you would dine here, sir. What can I get you?—a nice duck?"

But she caught herself up suddenly whilst uttering the ominous word.

He laughed.

"No," he said; "I don't seem to care about the ducks in these parts. I've a little business to transact down the town, and would like a steak and oysters, or mushrooms, if you can manage it, about six. And now I will take the ale."

As he was drinking it, he smiled to himself, and jingled his gold.

"I seem to have dropped into a nice little income, if things go on in this way!" said he. "What's this? Pidgeon, fifty pounds! Pidgeon is the next one I'll pluck. I'll give Pidgeon no mercy!"

He turned over one bill after the other, but stopped at one, and read it very carefully once or twice. It was an older document than any of the others, and the ink it was written with had paled with age.

"One thousand five hundred pounds, drawn by Hugh Challice, and accepted by Charles Challice, of The Grange, Haggford. Yes; there it is, safe enough. Ah, I'm not quite the pauper I was when I met her last! We shall meet again, now, in a few hours' time—we shall meet again, and then—"

He sat thinking a long while, till a clock striking three aroused him.

"To work!" he said, rising to his feet. "Now for it!"

THE SEVENTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH A SHADOW COMES CREEPING.

STEP I.—A TROUBLESOME SON.

"II.—A TROUBLESOME DAUGHTER.

"III.—A TROUBLESOME LOVE.

"IV.—A TROUBLESOME SHADOW.

STEP I.

It was an undisputed fact—therefore, shall we say, a fact indisputable—that Mr. Charles Challice was an excellent party, and any young lady in the country ought to have felt very proud and happy to have been chosen by him.

In this case, then, his dear cousin, Miss Harriet Challice, ought to have felt very proud and happy. Why, then, were her cheeks so often pale and her eyes so often red? Rich Mrs. Challice thought she was a strange, inanimate girl—"a curious choice of Charles's, when he could have done so much better." But she only thought this, and breathed no word to living soul.

Through life, this mother had been devotedly attached to her son—as devotedly as the other mother who had married her late husband's brother; only the other mother's son had gone rather wrong—how far wrong only she knew, for he had well-nigh broken her heart.

Charles and this other brother had been schoolfellows at Sandhurst, and later on had entered the same regiment, but did not associate very much. At first, they were thrown together by their tastes and occupation, for both had a passion for field sports and the turf; but for the latter one must have a lot of money in the absence of luck. Young Jack Challice had neither, and came to grief, as a matter of course.

He got into debt, got into worse debt, got over head and ears in debt, and most of his debts were "debts of honor," where much credit is not allowed. At a moment when disgrace seemed inevitable, his cousin Charles came to him one night in his room—they were quartered then in Ireland—and said, "Drop this, Jack. You're going on too fast. Your governor's not got the money mine has, and you haven't a chance. Luck's dead against you. Can't you see it yourself? You must lose. How are you to pay?"

Jack started up on this in a rage, and blustered. He was a little drunk, a not unusual thing with him.

"What business is it of yours," he cried. "Did I ask you to pay?"

"No," returned his cousin; "but I have."

"You have?"

"Don't be a fool. Sit down again. Yes: I heard something said, and wouldn't stand it being said twice. As it is, I knocked the fellow down, and took his receipt. There it is; and there's another, and another. Look here, Jack, drop this. Pay me back how and when you can, only leave off this betting. You've no luck, I say, and it isn't good enough for you."

This Charles Challice, the younger man of the two, had a blunt, straightforward way with him, which meant honesty to the backbone, but was nevertheless on many occasions highly offensive, when he had no intention of offending.

His cousin Jack swallowed the bitter pill just administered, thanked him clumsily, and never forgave him. He did not leave off betting, of course. Very few people who catch the betting fever do, any more than people who have smelt the footlights, from the wrong side of them, can shake off the complaint they catch from them, or gamblers can give up cards and dice.

Of course he was not going to take such an absurd opinion as the truth, that he had no luck. Why should not he have it some time or other?

With this idea, he plunged deeper into the mire, and floundered wofully. A good Samaritan, known by the name of Benson, crossed his path, found him bruised and sore, bound up his wounds in bank-notes, and set him going again—under a dismal misapprehension, for the good Samaritan weakly imagined that he had to do with the son of the rich Mr. Challice, not the poorer brother.

On his side, Mr. Jack Challice did anything but recoup himself for his former losses by the aid of Benson's loan. Luck was against him once more. He lost every farthing by backing the wrong horse.

When, after this, he went back to Benson for another supply, he found that worthy creature not quite so open-handed as before. On the contrary, Mr. Benson wanted better security.

"What security?"

"Your cousin Charles's name. His father is just dead, I hear. Bring me his name. You're great friends, are not you?"

"No; not very."

"But he won't refuse a relation, and you want the money so much."

"There's doubt about my wanting the money, but he won't lend me his name."

"Try him. He will, I am sure, if you manage matters properly. There! I don't want to see him, or have any trouble in the matter. Bring me his name across a bit of paper—mind, the stamp's all right—and the money's ready for you."

He wanted the money badly enough—so much so, that he screwed up his courage to go and ask Charles Challice to help him in the way Benson had suggested. Challice listened attentively, and, without any great show of feeling, refused. The whole interview only lasted a few minutes, and the rich man looking back at it a few weeks afterwards, when the news reached him of his cousin's ruin, flight, and death, he said, in explanation of his conduct, "I saw he was going the wrong road entirely. He was scraping together every farthing he could lay his hands on to back a horse who came in, as you know, absolutely nowhere. It wasn't even placed. But that was the worst of poor Jack—his only fault, as far as I know; he had no judgment—no luck!"

This was true enough. Jack had backed the wrong horse once again—the wrong horse which was to have been the right horse, and, with that perversity that attends many things in this world, came in last instead of first.

A large sum of money was squandered in this last "spurt" of "poor" Jack Challice's, inclusive of fifteen hundred pounds lent by Mr. Benson upon Charles Challice's name.

Poor Jack Challice's father died very shortly after the news reached him that the runaway had been picked up on the coast of Spain, drowned, during some bad weather, which also terminated the career of a few strictly honest fisherman and other insignificant persons. The shock had a bad effect upon the elder man's mind, never of the strongest, and he expired within but a month or two, leaving his affairs in a confused state.

From that time it became the widowed mother's only aim and object in life to pay off the debts of the father and son, and to stand clear with the world. Upon her knees at her son's grave, dug by strangers in a foreign land, she vowed to keep her loved child's name good among men.

As yet, no living soul had ever justly breathed a word against the honor of the house, and never should they. But the task she had set herself was a bitterly hard one to perform.

The demands made by some disastrous speculations of the father's upon his estates necessitated heavy mortgages; and then came the son's debts, crushing in their weight, and each one demanding immediate payment.

Valiantly the poor lady struggled and fought, suffering cruel privations in her, perhaps, exaggerated zeal; but gradually she got things into some kind of reasonable shape.

With what little she had left, after the most clamorous claims were satisfied, she made up her mind to settle down and drown away her life in the old Grange; and she could do this happily, knowing all was settled, and no one alive had any right to say that her dead son was anything but the most honorable of gentlemen.

Who among us shall laugh at this poor, martyred mother, because her shrunken cheeks are bespattered with the unhealthy roses she buys at the chemists' shops, and she grins dismally with false teeth, thinking she is smiling naturally and mirthfully, as people can who carry their own teeth, and have no secret sorrows gnawing at their hearts?

The rouge she wore to hide the grim signs and tokens on the surface by which the existence of such sorrows down below may be guessed at, as the whereabouts of precious metals is discovered by those learned in the art.

Had anyone lifted for you a corner of the curtain, and you could have peeped in at the dismal interior, where all was scheming, mean contrivances, and petty shifts and shuffles, you could have wept more easily than have laughed. The scene was sad and dreary enough, in all conscience.

Yet most people laughed, knowing no better, one among them being the rich Mrs. Challice, at the Hall.

Wonderful stories were current in the village. We have heard something of them in the gossip of good Mrs. Pegg and the buxom hostess of the "Blue Dragon." It was known for a fact by everybody that the old woman was "awfully mean," and it was supposed that she was also a miser. What else could she be, indeed? What could she do with her money?

She kept up some outward appearance in a gaunt, goblin kind of fashion, and this gave the idea. They dined off silver plate when, upon rare occasions, she entertained company; but the food was put upon the table so scant in quantity that people went away hungrier than they came.

We have seen how Mrs. Challice's wine made Benson wine, but she also brewed a small ale which was terror and destruction to the unwary.

It was said that old Martha had been found fishing in a pond at the end of the garden, which a few carp had the misfortune to inhabit—misfortune, I say, as they contributed to form some of the most unsavory fish dinners, when Martha had cooked them, that ever unhappy mortal pulled wry faces at.

Also, it was reported, rabbits in any number were snared by this same Martha in the plantation beyond; and that all the year round, in season or not in season, rabbits were juggled and eaten from economic motives by the two poor old women in The Grange.

Ah! it was, in truth, a weary life; as, for that matter, is the life of many other women among us, whose every day is full of patient suffering, and who live and die making no sign.

When the time came when she had done her utmost, and with tearful eyes thanked heaven that now all was paid, and her poor thoughtless boy's memory might be at rest, a gentle, unassuming knock came at the outer door, and a plump, rosy-faced man, giving his name as Benson, respectfully requested an interview.

He had brought with him the fifteen hundred pound bill for which Charles Challice had lent his name; and his (Mr. Benson's) reason for coming there with it, instead of going straight to the Hall, was because it was payable at the Grange, at which place Mr. Charles Challice, at the time the bill was drawn, resided, the building of the Hall not being complete.

Curiously enough, he never went on to the Hall for ten long, weary years, in each of which he had received a hundred and fifty pounds to hold over.

The day the rosy-faced man paid Mrs. Challice his first visit, Martha, after waiting a long while, went up to see her mistress, and was not a little scared by the look of her.

She sat there, rigid and motionless, with a deadly pallor which the rouge fought against helplessly. Her thin fingers tightly clutched the arms of her chair; her eyes were fixed upon vacancy with a look from which the intellect seemed wholly gone.

For a long while prayers and entreaties could wring nothing from her. Her misery was too deep for utterance; and when, at length, the secret was told, the two women bowed their heads together, and sobbed in concert. But they took this new and worst sorrow of all in silence. In future, without any verbal arrangement between them, it was yet somehow tacitly agreed that the dead son's fully and crime should not be spoken of; and this blot upon the hitherto unsullied honor of the house of Challice should be hidden—hidden at any price—hidden deep!

STEP II.

AFTER all, surely fifteen hundred pounds was out a paltry sum of money to make such a fuss about. Charles Challice could easily enough have paid it twice over out of his winnings at Doncaster; and when he and Harriet were married, it would not be a difficult matter, with such an easy husband as he would be, to obtain the money without having to answer many questions, and so quietly settle the matter.

What did the future wife of Challice herself say to this notable scheme? What could she say?

Coming from school with her head well stocked with romantic notions, as you may be sure, she fell readily into the trap laid for her, and felt that the sacrifice—if sacrifice it were—was a dread necessity which must be—

which could not possibly be avoided. The mother could not quite look upon the rich marriage of the cousins as any sacrifice on her child's part, even if it were done solely for her sake. It seemed, from all points of view, so desirable a thing; and what but some foolish fancy had she to urge against it? Yet, with growing uneasiness, the mother could not help noticing that there was something—that the daughter was not happy—that for the man she was going to marry she had no love.

The best part of real life love-making among young ladies and gentlemen is such precious humdrum, commonplace stuff to the rest of us who are not in love, and only look on, that passion seems to form no part of it. In these cases one does not expect to see a very demonstrative affection. Things are, as it were, taken easily. Interviews occur which appear to us outsiders of a somewhat tame and insipid character.

Vows are interchanged somewhat flabbily. A certain length of time is set apart as necessary for the sake of appearances to the engagement, and then a mild marriage takes place; and an interval of honeymoon, with in many instances, more awkwardness than ecstasy about it, separates the humdrum of courtship from the settled bickerings of wedlock, in which so many fret their lives away.

In Harriet Challice's case, the lookers-on, for the most part, saw no reason why they should entertain any doubt that she was just as happy and contented as other young ladies. She was rather a strange girl, that was all, with peculiar ways.

For many of these ways Charles Challice liked her above any other woman he had ever met. A good many men (out of books) do not want to be always making love, because it is not (out of books) a wholly engrossing business with men as it is with many women, and there are plenty of men married, as well as unmarried, who have never made love at all.

Challice liked to talk for hours about his horses, and Harriet would enter into the spirit of the conversation with a real or well-feigned interest in that engrossing topic. As a duty, perhaps, she opened a mystic volume called "Ruff's Guide," and studied its pages as diligently as she had in her time studied other educational works at school, and made considerable progress.

Though hitherto she had but little experience in such things, she possessed, seemingly, a natural gift for riding and driving, and was soon, with all the carriage and horses at the Hall at her disposal, vastly proficient.

Charles Challice was very happy talking of horses to her, or riding by her side, or being driven by her even, sometimes, in his dog-cart, just to see how she could do it, and what her pluck was like.

She danced well, and he also liked dancing. She had a tolerably pretty face, as already stated, as faces go; and what was better—as Charles Challice, and about ninety-nine out of a hundred other men in good society would have agreed—a graceful figure, on which her clothes "went well." Your romancists ignore the female form from the chin downwards, I have observed during my progress through polite fiction; so, perhaps, even as little as I have said may not be thought to be in the best taste. But really, now, we have heard so much about lovely faces—have not we?—and seen so little of them?

Charles Challice, to Harriet's relief, made very little love. If it was to be always thus, she got to think, it would be somehow endurable.

She was a great deal at the Hall, where much company was kept, and it was, on the whole, amusing—not quite so amusing as it had at first seemed to her when all was new and strange; but she did not ask herself why this was—only cried when she thought of it now and then, and when she thought no one was looking.

In ignorance of the real cause, the mother sought about for some other, and could find none. She knew no more of that romantic episode in her daughter's life connected with the dancing-master than Harriet did herself, for the intercepted letter had brought matters quickly to a crisis, and the mad fool, who had mistaken condescension for encouragement, was turned adrift without the particulars relating to his rash act even being known to the pupils in the school.

What was the real cause, then? We shall see.

At times—pretty frequently—Charles Challice was somewhat dull and pompous in his discourse, even with Harriet. He was a stickler for the proprieties—from his point of view—and talked not a little of the past greatness of the House of Challice and its unsullied honor—themes which were not pleasant for the girl to listen to, knowing what she did.

The necessity for a speedy marriage became when he thus spoke, painfully apparent to her; and, at the same time, she could not help asking herself how companionship with him was to be everlastingly endured. His manners, even now, were cold and indifferent. What would it be, then, when the chain was riveted—the heavy chain there would be no shaking off?

When, then, he spoke of the approaching marriage, and intimated that something like a definite period should be fixed for the termination of this odd kind of courtship, that had now been going on for about three months, she made many excuses and delays. Perhaps, after all, she thought the dreadful thing would pass away, and she could marry whom she liked.

In her young experience of life it did not seem as though it were possible that dreadful things could go on forever, and her mother must exaggerate. Sometimes the mother herself thought she had magnified the danger a little bit. Benson in their last interview had threatened exposure did she not settle his claim within a few days; but then he had died. Would not the threat, after all, die with him, and the extortion she had suffered from so long be at an end?

Every day she woke up expecting some letter would arrive by the post announcing the commencement of hostilities, but none came. For a long while she trembled at every knock, thinking that surely now the time and the man had arrived. But gradually, as time rolled on, she got easier in her mind, and almost fancied herself safe.

She had no exact period fixed in her mind as that on which Benson's executor might return, as it was fixed on the minds of some of his other debtors, whose debts had been renewed for three months.

So much difficulty had she had sometimes in scraping together the money to pay the interest he demanded, and so many delays had occurred, that she was not quite certain now which was the exact day when, in the ordinary course of things, more interest might be expected.

In this way the three months passed away, and the arrival of Benson's representative upon the day he came at last was the last thing the unhappy woman expected.

STEP III.

That day was a momentous one in the life of Harriet Challice.

She had been for a drive with her cousin, and the subject of her marriage with him had come up again, and been discussed not altogether pleasantly in certain phases of its progress. They had begun quite well enough with the town talk, and Harriet had been lively and animated. When, however, reaching what he thought to be a suitable place in the road, he essayed a tender passage, she pushed him away a little impatiently.

"Don't!" said she.

Charles Challice drew back sulkily, and looked straight between his horse's ears, and very hard indeed at the country ahead.

"No stranger, to look at us," said he, "would even imagine we were an engaged couple."

"I should hope not," she said. "The melancholy fact is sufficiently well known and talked of as it is."

He thought this answer over, and did not much care about it.

"If it is so melancholy, why not put an end to it?"

"How?"

"How?" he repeated.

"How do you mean?"

"By getting married of course. What else could I mean?"

"Oh—of course," said she. "I did not think of that."

They went on a long way in silence after this. Challice was very much vexed, and, at the same time, ashamed of himself for being put out, and he hoped he had not shown it too plainly.

He thought he ought to say something else, and wondered what. He felt altogether decidedly uncomfortable.

After a lengthy and awkward pause, he summed up courage, and broke out with:

"You don't really mean what you say, Harriet, do you? I was speaking to your mother yesterday. She says she is anxious our wedding should take place soon, and that she thought long engagements unnecessary. Your mother would like us to get married, I am sure."

She said nothing.

"You know me well enough by this time," Harriet, don't you? I'm not one of your talking fellows, with a lot of fine words made up to turn women's heads—stupid women's heads, you know! I—I love you, of course, and all that, very much; and we seem to be of the same taste; and I must have a wife some time or other to sit at the other end of the table, you know, and do the honors, and all that, don't you?"

But still she said nothing.

"I don't want to hurry you, of course," he went on, "or force you to say a sooner time than you like; only in the fall of the year, when the racing's over, and then we might go abroad, a tour to some of those foreign places. I don't care a great deal myself for foreigners and foreign places, but, perhaps, you would if you haven't seen much of them. What do you say now?"

"I think I should like to see them."

"But I don't mean that. You know what I mean! About the day, you know?"

"Fix your own time."

"Really now. That's jolly!"

He stopped the horse.

"You don't mind kissing me, do you?"

"No."

"Suppose we fix this day month; that will not be too soon for you?"

He told his mother, after he reached the house, the determination that had been come to; and she, turning a little sigh into a slight cough, went—she thought it her duty—to talk to Harriet upon the subject.

Then an odd kind of interview took place between the two women, each one pretending, and each with a vague uneasiness about the heart. But they kissed one another, and neither knew the other's secret.

With an unutterable sense of relief, Harriet, presently finding herself free, ran out into the garden, hastened down a side-path leading through the Hall grounds, with its artificial lake and recently-constructed shrubberies, to a real, nature-planted dell, dim with overhanging branches—a part of that wood where the gipsies had pitched their tents, and the escaped convict had crept into to hide.

Here alone and unobserved, she could cry to her heart's content, and covering her face with her hands, burst into a torrent of angry tears.

Here, with none to hear, she could call aloud on heaven to help her, and feel some kind of solace in the fact that her griefs were outspoken loudly, not cramped and stifled, as at all other times they perforce must be, within her breast.

"Oh, my dear love!" she cried; "how I love you! Oh why is it wicked that I should love you, and not him? Why should I have to tie myself to him? Oh, I cannot—I cannot! What shall I do?"

She fell upon her knees, and sank down lower and lower, laying her tearful face upon the soft moss at the roots of a great tree, and roughly her hair fell over her features, half hiding them.

As she remained in this attitude for a long while, crying very softly, a little green lizard, feeling curious about her, came out of his dwelling-house and timidly approached and sniffed at the toe of her little kid shoe, then quietly retired, satisfied in his mind; and perhaps as if he were a lizard whose young life had been blighted also by some perversity, in love, he sympathized with her, but he said nothing.

A dog, however, who followed the lizard, and also smelt at the toe of the pretty shoe—an object which would have attracted two-legged animals of the male species, had they been there to see it, to say nothing of

a wee glimpse of a blue silk stocking, with a pretty clock upon the side—a dog, I say, who came out on Harriet's prostrate form suddenly from a thicket hard by, stopped and barked one short bark, which roused the girl from her half-stupor: and scrambling to her feet, and hastily pushing the tangled hair away from her flushed features, she saw Captain Everest standing behind the dog, looking on half in wonder, and, as it seemed to her, half in pity.

It was the latter expression—perhaps a fanciful one, after all, existing only in her own imagination—which brought the deep crimson flush to her cheek, and drove it as suddenly away again.

"What are you doing here?" she cried. "What was I saying?"

He approached silently, and took her hand.

"My dear little girl, what is the matter? What has happened? Anything wrong between you and Charley?"

"Between him and me? How could anything be right? Why do you—how can you ask me this? Oh, there, there, take no notice of what I said! I am mad, I think! Let me go, please! I will go!"

And, in a passionate flood of tears, she tore herself from him, and ran back towards the house.

STEP IV.

WITHIN half a dozen yards Everest had overtaken her, was striving to detain her, to reason with her.

He would have been dull, indeed, had he not quickly and clearly understood what part he himself was playing in this strange scene, but he, as it were, ignored his identity. He, Everest, Challice's friend, would have advised Challice's betrothed to waste no more thought upon that other Everest, who, in the early days of their acquaintance, might have spoken first, but was too slow about it.

"Charley is the best fellow in the world," he said, and meant what he was saying.

"Yes," she answered, briefly, making a little face at a daisy she was just that moment treading on.

"He said when you were married you were going a tour through Europe. That is a delightful thing to do when one is rich. I shall have to travel again myself, soon."

"We shall meet you, perhaps."

"No; I shan't go to the usual show-places—that is an amusement better suited to rich men. I shall look up some savage parts. Nothing tamer than the Rocky Mountains will suit me. I have an idea of selling out, and going away to shoot buffaloes or Red Indians!"

"Selling out! You are joking."

"Indeed, no. I find myself suddenly in a most peculiar position. A mysterious unknown, with whose name, even, I am wholly unacquainted, has been in the habit, so long as I can remember, of supplying me with a handsome income. It has been my custom, I am ashamed to say, of taking it for granted that I had every right to the income in question, and of living on it quite naturally, and I have never taken any very great amount of trouble to ascertain from what source it came. Suddenly, however, the supply ceases. Three months and one day ago, exactly, I received my last installment. I had always, every three months to the day, done so with the most astonishing regularity. Three months and one day since the person from whom I derived my income, or his agent, died suddenly. I made all kinds of inquiries about him, and I ascertained that he left a large sum of money in his bank, which lies there still, unclaimed, and which most certainly cannot be claimed by me, as there is not one iota of evidence forthcoming to entitle me to a share in his property. Yesterday, at Doncaster, I should have received my quarterly allowance. It did not reach me, and neither was it sent to my rooms in town. By some vague chance I thought it would have been forwarded here to the hall, as I might be supposed to return with Challice from Doncaster, but it was not waiting for me. Indeed, I did not really expect it."

"But it is only a day overdue," remarked his companion.

"Nearly two days now; and during the whole time the allowance has been made to me, to the best of my belief it has never been an hour behind. When I have been traveling about in half savage places, and my address has been necessarily rather uncertain, these mysterious quarterly payments have followed me with the greatest regularity, and have always been lying waiting for me at the recognized address punctual to the hour."

"How strange! But may be it will come yet."

"I do not believe there is the least chance of it; and I have quite made up my mind to sell out, as I said at first, and go in for buffaloes and Red Indians."

"I cannot help thinking you are joking. Anyhow, you will not sell out now. Besides, you have still your pay to live on."

Everest laughed. "I should not be able to live on my pay, I am afraid. My mysterious unknown, probably with the very best intentions, managed to supply me with expensive tastes as well as a liberal allowance. I had got into a way of living at the rate of almost double the amount, though it was liberal enough, in all conscience. And, do you know, it is the most difficult thing in all the world to begin being economical upon the scene of your former extravagances. People who break down, and break up, go away—why should not I follow their example? There is no reason in the world why I should stay."

During this somewhat long story of the Captain's, his companion had had plenty of leisure to compose herself whilst she listened to him. She did listen most attentively, and burst out with a strange enough expression when he thus reached an end.

"Oh, what a cruel thing it is to be poor! What does it not make people do? It is dreadful!"

He slightly stared, as he turned towards her, and

smiled faintly, as he said: "It makes one very often do many mean, petty things. It frequently requires more courage to face little unpleasantnesses than real troubles and dangers."

"It may force you to a great sacrifice sometimes; under certain circumstances, may blight your whole life."

"Happily, Miss Challice, you are not likely to know anything of the poverty you speak of."

"Why not?"

"Why not? Well, Challice has a splendid income, not derivable from mysterious unknowns; and if he only kept within limits in his racing transactions, and is once or twice as lucky as he was yesterday at Doncaster, there is not much likelihood of your ever being in any want of money."

"No; that is true."

She said these last words in a scarcely audible tone, and more as though she were thinking to herself, than speaking to him.

They had by this time reached the Hall, and she left him, and went hastily upstairs to her room, for the dinner-bell was ringing.

He, also, went away to dress, with as much haste as possible, making his mind up to come in some time after the fish. But though he had no time to lose, even if he were to do that much, he more than once fell into an attitude of thought, and pondered profoundly—much, be it said, to the annoyance of the gentleman who was good enough to engage himself as the Captain's valet, and who was exceedingly anxious to go out, and keep a most particular appointment, about which, this history having nothing to do, no more need be said, and no breach of confidence committed.

More than once during dinner, and afterwards, in the evening, Captain Everest, when he could do so unobserved, watched Harriet closely, and pondered more than ever.

Her last words had thrown a sudden light upon what hitherto he had been very wrongly misinterpreting. When he had told the story of his pecuniary difficulties, he had done so with the intention of hinting that he himself, as a match for a young lady with Harriet's chances, was certainly not to be thought of, and he innocently supposed that his observations were having a morally salutary effect.

He knew that the girl loved, or thought she loved him, and did not at present love Charles Challice, to whom she was, nevertheless, engaged to be married.

This affection for him he thought he had sufficient sound sense to see at once must be crushed out, at any cost.

Men can often reason this way when passion blinds the woman entirely. She is urged on to almost any folly without reflection; but, as the crisis comes, the man holds back, and asks himself calmly, "Shall not I be a fool if I go on with this further?"

On their first meeting, it is true, Harriet had awakened an interest in the somewhat worn, *blase* heart of this traveler, who had lived, perhaps, at too high a pressure to retain much power for sentiment, and he had hardly been able to account to himself for his feelings in the matter. Indeed, like some thousands have done before him, he did not know how much it hurt him to lose a thing till it was gone altogether.

When Charles Challice came blundering to him, and told him in a broken, trembling voice, and blushing like a girl, that he was going to be married, Everest, for the first time, learnt that his dearest friend was going to marry the only woman in the world he had ever felt any love for, and the pill was the very hardest he had ever had to take.

He swallowed it though, bravely, without a moment's hesitation, and shook hands with Challice and congratulated him. "She's the only woman I would have cared to marry, myself," said he, "if I had been a marrying man, which is not at all likely, now."

And then he gave Challice a light for his cigar, and his blessing.

About two days later, a chance word from Harriet's lips made him start and tremble. He was not the only one who had loved silently, and he felt that, somehow his life had been accidentally spoilt.

Being a curious kind of person, whom some people might have thought indifferent by nature, and incapable of feeling much, because he put an almost constant constraint upon outward utterances, he came to the conclusion that two or three lives need not also be spoilt because he himself had been unlucky; and that the best thing for him to do was to keep away from the Hall and Harriet's presence as much as possible.

"She'll very soon get over it," he said to himself. "It can only be a school-girl fancy of hers, and she does not know her own mind; and Challice is my dearest friend. It is confoundedly awkward; but there!"

The whole thing might have been set straight, very probably, had Everest gone away; and nothing but an intolerable indolence, which he rarely summoned up strength enough to break through, kept him hovering about the scene, which was anything but a pleasant one to him now.

In the same way that he had been intending ever since Benson's death, when he drew what he had a presentiment was the last installment of his income he would ever receive, to regulate his affairs and start life afresh. But here he was, three months older, three months deeper in debt, and at last without a penny of ready money, unless he sold his commission, his horses, his phaeton, or his furniture, to pay his creditors.

Just at this moment he made a strange discovery. Here was a woman who undoubtedly was deeply in love with him, and who was marrying a man whom she, perhaps, actually hated, and who, in doing so, was making a sacrifice the necessity for which was a puzzle to him that excited his strongest curiosity; and he watched her every look, hoping to get some clue to the secret which he was reluctant to question her about.

Other eyes watched her, too, that night. Many and many a time a shadow flitted past the open windows, and mingled with the darker shadows cast by the

bushes upon the lawn, as the form that gave it birth cowered down at the sound of some approaching footstep, and crept away.

This shadow, at no distant period, was to cross Harriet Challice's path in life, as it had done twice before, to what end we shall see.

THE THIRD FIGURE.

IN WHICH THE WOLVES ARE GROWLING.

STEP I.—BLACK-MAIL.
" II.—PLAYING SPY.
" III.—MADNESS.
" IV.—AT LAST!

STEP I.

DOCTOR TRUEMAN'S house stood in a hollow, about a quarter of a mile distant from the new railway station at East Haggleford, and it was just a chance that the line did not take it in its course.

Luck was against the doctor in this respect, as it had often enough been in others. He had been particularly unfortunate with regard to family bereavements, and if he had not insured the lives of his relatives he would have had nothing to console himself with when death robbed him of their companionship.

In the case of one of his latest relatives, a kind of cousin three or four times removed, who occupied the not very elevated position of hanger-on and odd man in a trainer's stable, and whose life he had insured for fourteen thousand pounds (an almost exaggerated value to put on it), the directors of the insurance office—though directors rarely or never dispute payment in any case—without giving any very decided reasons for their conduct, simply declined to pay.

Naturally enough, the doctor was surprised and annoyed by this strange course, and felt the refusal none the less because, just at that moment, it so happened that he was rather particularly pressed by claims upon his purse.

Dr. Trueman, indeed, was remarkably unfortunate. He had scarcely any practice to speak of, for most of the people who would have cared to call in his services were too poor to be worth his while going to, and the few families within easy distance of his abode did not take kindly to the sporting doctor.

He was all right, though, at the Hall, he frequently remarked; and the Hall was worth all the rest put together. This was true enough, as far as it went, but it was only on account of Charles Challice's sporting tastes, and the fact that his medical adviser could doctor horses as well, if not better, than he could men, besides having an agreeable manner, and being a decent fellow to talk to, that had got him his footing at the big house. Perhaps, if the truth must be told, he was only tolerated there, not treated as an equal.

Rather in the neighboring towns, where sporting men most congregated, did the doctor shine. He was a kind of small king there, and held in a sort of doubtful honor—an odd kind of undefined awe—by the set in which he moved. A "good fellow, well met"—a boisterous, over-cordial person, whom everybody nodded to, and called familiarly "Doctor," but about whom, after all, really very little was known.

His house stood in a damp hollow, shaded by a great yew-tree, beneath the outstretched branches of which the earth lay black and naked, and gave a dismal, churchyard look to the garden in the front of the house.

On to this garden looked the surgery window, and the light from it lay on the ill-kept grass-plot in diamond-shaped patterns. It was the same night on which the incidents just described took place, and Dr. Trueman was making up his physic all alone by himself in the house.

The yellow light of a candle placed before him fell with a Rembrandt-like effect upon his heavy features, just now wrinkled into an expression of concentrated attention, as he dropped something from a phial into a glass, very slowly and surely, a drop at a time; and so little movement was visible in the face and figure, that he might have been taken for a painting instead of a reality, had a picture-frame filled the place of the window-frame enclosing him. At least, a roughly-dressed, sailor-looking man was of this opinion, as he stopped outside the garden-gate, leant on it, and stared at the doctor hard.

"Blest if he ain't a cool hand!" said the sailor-man, below his breath, "and as steady as a rock. I suppose doctors ought to be that. There's life and death in that bottle, may be; and a drop one way or the other would make all the difference."

The doctor, meanwhile, having let fall so many drops from the phial he held in one hand into a glass held in the other, carefully corked the former, and put it into a cupboard, then tossed the contents of the glass down his own throat.

"He's taking his own physic!" said the sailor, with an oath; and he grinned at the oddness of the incident, then gently raised the latch of the gate.

The sound he made in so doing was very faint, but it caused the doctor to turn his head quickly, and shading his eyes, he watched the figure approaching.

Seemingly, it was known to him, for he rose from his seat, came and opened the door, and stood upon the threshold, barring the passage.

"Now, then?" he said.

"I came here, doctor, to find you!"

"I see that. Why?"

"It was an unlucky job the day before yesterday!"

"Was it?"

"Well, you know what I mean. I did my best, but it couldn't be worked, somehow. If you could have kept the old fool away a little longer, I should have managed Jack very easy; and as to the horse, I'll swear my method wouldn't have failed!"

"You acted like a fool, and may thank your stars it did not cost you your life! Good night to you."

"Don't send me away like that, doctor. Come; I've no right to ask what you promised, I know, 'cause I didn't carry out my half of the bargain. But we may do business again; don't be hard upon me."

"I don't think I should care to be mixed up in any more business with you," said the doctor, with a smile. "But I know where to find you if I alter my mind. Now, then, what else do you want? I should like to shut the door."

"Truth is, doctor, I haven't a feather to fly with, things have turned out so dreadful crooked! I'm desperate—that's what I am!"

"So I should think, to come rambling round the wall of the prison you broke out of! You must be mad, I should think."

"Whist! not so loud! I'm safe enough, though. Close to is safer than a long way off. But I'd like to get a distance away, if I could. You'll help me, won't you, doctor?"

"I!—why on earth should I?"

"There's no reason, of course. I'm not trying for black mail."

"I should think not!"

"Let me come in a moment and sit down. Some one might pass in the road and see us talking, and"—

"What is that to me? I've nothing to be afraid of."

"No, no! Of course I know that. I thought you might not like to have a rough chap like me seen hanging about your place, that was all!"

"If I wished to avoid it I should not allow it."

There was a moment's silence, and the man on the wrong side of the door glanced under his eyelids very evilly at the other.

"Well then, not to make a long tale of it," he said, "will you help me with a pound or two? I know you didn't do badly, even as things turned out. You've too much wit for that. Help me on the road, and I'll be your servant whenever you think fit to raise your little finger."

"I'll not turn my back on you altogether, as you are in want, but I've very little to spare. Here are a couple of half-crowns. Take them, or leave them. I'm going to shut the door."

Muttering in a whining tone, that the doctor was very hard on him, the sailor pocketed the money, and shuffled away. On the other hand, Dr. Trueman closed the door, and bolted it, smiling to himself as he did so.

STEP II.

THE sailor had not gone more than a hundred yards up the road, when he heard steps coming towards him, and a voice singing that he knew, for he started and stepped back into the shadow of a high hedge, to let the singer pass.

"That's Dick again," thought he; "and how merry he is! I'd give something if I knew what he's about down here! It's nothing on the square, I'll take my oath of that. Where's he going now, I wonder? Why shouldn't I follow him?"

There seemed no reason why he should not do so if he thought fit, for Dick Deverel was absorbed in his own musical performances, and carolling so loudly as to quite drown any noise the other's footsteps might make.

Spicer, the escaped convict—for such, surely was the seafaring person, wonderfully confusing as was his make-up of sandy beard and whiskers—turned about, and followed cautiously, and without getting into any dangerous proximity, kept the ex-dancing-master well in view.

The first house he stopped at was the doctor's, and marching boldly through the gate, which he left to bang to noisily behind him, he knocked boldly at the outer door.

After a few moments' delay, the doctor came to open it, and stood as he had stood when speaking to Spicer, upon the threshold.

"Dr. Trueman, I presume?" the convict heard Dick say.

"That is my name."

"I have a bill of yours here, sir; drawn on you by Samuel Benson, and endorsed to me."

"Will you step inside?"

The door closed on Dick Deverel; and Spicer, in the road outside, took off his waterproof hat, carefully wiped his forehead with a colored pocket-handkerchief, and gave one long, low whistle.

The road without was almost perfectly quiet, and he had, doubtless, heard clearly every word that had been uttered—every word, in fact, except the surname of the person who according to Deverel's account, had passed the bill to him.

He could not quite imagine it possible that he had caught the name of Benson; and yet he could make no other out of the sound that had reached his ears.

However, having heard so much, he hoped to hear more, and, therefore, waited patiently. Happily, too, his endurance was not put to any severe test.

He sheltered himself in the shadow of the yew tree before the doctor's house, and saw something of the interview going on in the doctor's parlor and the adjoining apartment.

Here he saw the doctor courteously motioning his old gaol friend to the soft arm-chair; and afterwards saw him smilingly produce a bottle of wine, talking the while in what must have been, he felt sure, if he could have heard him, a conciliatory tone.

In response, Dick Deverel seemed to be smiling grimly, and shaking his head, as if he would say, "You can't get over me! You won't get over me, mind you, with any soft speeches or old patter! I want my bill, and nothing but my bill will satisfy me!"

The doctor, however, seemed to reason with him, and put a certain case plausibly; then Dick softened a little, and at last pen and ink and a long slip of paper were produced (the latter by Dick), and certain words

filled up upon it by the doctor; and then Dick, carelessly pocketing a bank-note, put the long strip of paper into his pocket, gave another one to the doctor, and took his departure.

"That's rather a different style of interview to that I had with him just now," muttered Spicer, between his set teeth. "I'll have a finger in Dick's pie, though, or I'll die for it! Where's he going to now, I wonder?"

The next house Dick called at was about a quarter of a mile further on; and, from the sound of music within, and the lighted-up windows, it was evident that the persons in the house were giving a little party.

Such proved to be the case. Spicer once more took up his position in a place where he could safely see what passed without being himself observed, and saw Dick knock and make an inquiry of a servant-girl who opened the door.

After a short delay, the master of the house, Good-enough, the miller, came to the door with a very perturbed countenance, and pulling Dick on one side, said, in an audible whisper, "Don't speak loud, sir, if you please. I have some friends inside. Would you excuse me? Would you mind stepping this way?"

They came to a standstill within a few feet of Spicer's ambush, and this time he could overhear all that passed.

"As Mr. Benson was dead, I—I did not quite expect"—the miller stammered.

"Did not quite expect what? You must have known you would have to pay the money!"

"Yes, my dear sir; certainly—of course! Only not hearing yesterday, when I had the sum ready prepared and waiting—but to-morrow, the first thing, by eleven o'clock, when I have had time to ride over and draw it out from the bank!"

"Very well; I don't wish to put you to any inconvenience, if it can be avoided. Eleven will suit me, here. A hundred and ten pounds, I think?"

"Yes. At eleven, then."

"Punctually."

"To the minute."

They bade each other good night, and Deverel walked away, Spicer creeping out again to follow him.

"A hundred and ten pounds!" he thought to himself, rubbing his hands with delight; "a—hundred—and—ten—pounds! Why, it's coining money! It's like the goldfields of Australia when they were first found out! How's he do it? It's like magic! It's as if he'd got something about him like dog-stealers have! I must be in this, if I die for it!"

Deverel was walking now at a brisk pace, and he had to hurry on to keep him in sight. It had got into something like a chase, and was even more exciting than the generality of chases are.

"He must have his pockets pretty well full as it is!" Spicer thought. Would it be worth while to go for it now, in this dark lane! I wonder whether he's got any iron on him?"

But before the convict could quite screw his courage up to the sticking-place, Deverel had passed through the lane, and was out in the open fields beyond, once more in safety.

It was a more difficult matter now to follow without being observed, and Spicer was compelled to increase the distance between himself and the man whose actions he was playing the spy upon. Presently, though, he saw Deverel enter another shaded road, leading to the Hall.

"He's surely never going to work them there too?" said Spicer, with a gasp. "Why, this beats anything I ever read or heard of out of a fairy book!" and he came on quickly, to see what would happen.

The large trees growing by the roadside made the road itself almost pitch dark; and when Spicer reached the corner he paused to listen.

He could hear nothing. Was the other waiting for him? This would be awkward.

But no.

Suddenly he caught sight of Deverel's figure perched upon the top of a high wall, which separated the grounds of the Challices' house from the public highway.

He seemed to be listening; but, after a brief pause, was apparently satisfied that he was unobserved. Then he let himself down gently on the other side.

Spicer found an easy place for mounting, and climbed after him.

STEP III.

To say that the spy was completely bewildered by Deverel's proceedings thus far would not be the least exaggeration; but whatever there had been astonishing in his acts hitherto, his conduct from this point got to be so utterly incomprehensible that there was no hope of a person who only speculated on unlikely probabilities keeping pace with him.

Supposing he had also a claim on the owner of the Hall, as he had shown himself to possess upon the dwellers in other less pretentious residences, he would surely have approached in the ordinary way, by the front door.

But, for some reason, best known to himself, he preferred to creep into the grounds like a thief.

"He can't mean to steal anything, surely?" Spicer argued with himself. "If that were so, I'd run all the risks, and share half of the profits, by following him. However, here goes! I'll risk it."

This amateur Red Indian business he had embarked in was rather more difficult to carry out now than it had been hitherto, for he had not only to hide himself from Deverel's observation, but to take care he was not seen by anyone belonging to the house, as, in the latter case, the mere fact of his being there, a trespasser, might get him into a world of trouble.

Fortune favored him, however, and he was able to creep along in the shadows of the trees and bushes,

and do as his old jail companion's footsteps in perfect safety.

It would have seemed as though this were not Deverel's first visit, so readily did he thread the intricacies of the garden, artfully laid out and studded with clumps of thick foliage, so as to make it look much larger than it was; though it was, in reality, by no means a small place.

In a very short time, therefore, he had reached that part of the house to which he was directing his steps, and which proved to be the exterior of a well-stocked conservatory, opening out of a brightly-lighted room, from which the sounds of dance music, and quick-moving feet reached them both.

But here the watcher of Deverel's actions began to experience a new sensation. Hitherto he had found the chase a sharp one, and at times rather trying for the breath; and it had been exciting enough, but from this point it got to be not a little tedious. For one mortal hour, Deverel, having planted himself in a corner where he was shaded from observation both within and without, remained, as it seemed to the other perfectly motionless.

Now and then the rustle of dresses approached nearer to the end of the conservatory where he was hidden, and the sound of subdued voices with love-tones in them; and once a couple opened the door and passing out, stood upon the gravel path in the moonlight, within half a dozen yards of the place where Spicer crouched among the bushes and within thirty feet of the corner where Deverel was hiding.

But they did not remain long, rather to Spicer's disappointment, to whom their talk was a pleasing variety, after a monotonous three quarters of an hour's watching. More than once he wished he had contented himself with what he had found out already of his old friend's mysterious movements, and given up the spy business for the night.

Yet would that have been satisfactory? Up to now Deverel's conduct had been puzzling enough, and yet he could make something of it. But what on earth was he doing here.

Another half-hour passed, and so motionless was the attitude that the ex-dancing-master maintained, that Spicer was half doubtful whether he was yet there, or had crept noiselessly away. At last he began to think that it was perfectly impossible that he could endure this purgatory any longer. But just at that identical moment a deep-drawn sighing breath from the object of his curiosity caused him to prick up his ears.

Raising himself on his hands and knees that he might see better, the spy craned his neck and strained his eyes, and saw that Deverel in his turn was so eager to observe what was going on within the conservatory, that he had come half out of the shadow which had hidden him.

From this place of observation, Spicer could see also whom it was that had attracted the other's attention.

A young pretty woman, but very pale, and somewhat over-languid in her movements, had entered the conservatory, and, passing through it, approached the door.

She paused, though, on her way, and placed upon a table her fan and gloves, and a small set of ivory tablets, on which, perhaps, she had been registering her dance engagements.

She stood at the door quite motionless, and on her upraised face the moonlight fell with a cold, gray tint, which made her statue-like, and truly beautiful to look upon.

But scarcely had she been there more than a minute, when a tiny ripple, as it were, passed over her features, then another and another, and the tears welled up into her eyes, and glistened like silver, then rolled slowly down her cheeks.

As the tears fell, her lips moved, and some words, not audible to the most distant of the listeners, escaped them.

But just then a voice within was heard calling, "Harriet—Miss Challice!"

Hastily drying her eyes, she turned and entered the conservatory again, but without responding to the call—perhaps not being able to make her answer with sufficient quickness; and, in her hurry, Spicer could see that she dropped one of the articles she had put upon the table, on the floor.

A moment afterwards, to his intense amazement, he saw Deverel dart through the open door into the conservatory, make a scrambling rush at the thing the girl had dropped, which he could make out, as Deverel raised it, was a kid glove—and running out with it, kiss it in a kind of mad ecstasy again and again.

And then, without further delay, and with the greatest apparent disregard of who might be observing him, he pushed his way hurriedly through the shrubs, and over the flower-beds, in the direction which he had come.

Wondering more and more, Spicer followed him as quickly as he could. He almost fancied at first that it was to obtain possession of some piece of jewelry that had prompted Deverel to commit this wild act, although a man making the sums of money he appeared to make, would scarcely find it worth his while to risk his liberty for a trifling trinket. However, it was clear enough now that no such motive had prompted him. The real object of Deverel's visit was revealed by his act, and Spicer was stunned with amazement.

He kept Deverel well in sight, as they retraced their steps in the direction of East Haggledford, and at last reached the "Blue Dragon."

It only wanted a few minutes of Em Pember's usual hour for closing; and Spicer having, through the glass top of the door, watched his old friend safely landed in the parlor, entered the bar, and ordered a glass of brandy to steady himself.

"This game's quite good enough," he reflected, "even as far as it goes: but it'll grow better, perhaps. The only fear I have is that it'll somehow slip through my fingers if I play round about it too long. The

straight road's the best, after all, in nineteen cases out of twenty. I'll go the straight road. I'll strike while the iron's hot."

STEP IV.

Em Pember had, meanwhile, taken Deverel's supper in to him; and he was eating at leisure, intending, then to have a pipe and a glass of grog before going to the soft feather bed up-stairs, which he had occupied the previous night, and had engaged for that night also.

The ex-dancing-master partook of the meat before him with an evident relish, and as he held his glass of claret up to the light, that he might see its color was to his liking, he smiled good-humoredly. Things were going well with him. The swindle he had engaged in was progressing more favorably than he had ever hoped, and it seemed so safe. There was no one in the world to claim a share in his riches, and he slapped his pocket with an exulting air, and tossed off a glass of wine.

Just then Em Pember came in to say that a person wanted to see him.

Deverel paused in the act of filling his glass. He had made no secret of the fact that he had put up at the "Blue Dragon" whilst conducting his business, which had taken him rather longer than he had at first expected. On the contrary he had wished to appear as open and above-board as possible, lest any whisper of a suspicion might arise respecting his right to the documents he was turning to such profitable account.

Only, up to now, no one had sought him; and instinctively he felt that the person who asked for an interview was some one he did not care to see.

"Who is it, Miss Pember? Do you know him?"

"I never saw him before, sir. He's a sailor, by his dress."

"Did he ask for me by name?"

"No. He said he would like to speak to the gentleman in the parlor. He was coming in of his own accord, but I told him it was private, and a gentleman was in here at supper."

"Tell him to come in."

The sailor could scarcely have been said to wait for the invitation, for he had been standing on the mat while this conversation took place; and now he passed silently in, and remained silent till the door had closed behind the hostess's back; then lifting his hat, stared into Deverel's face.

"Do you know me?" asked Spicer.

"I hardly should have done if I had met you in the street. No; I shouldn't have recognized you, I think, with that beard."

"If you wouldn't, Dick, I may feel pretty safe, then, for you've sharp eyes."

"You run great risks, don't you, coming down to these parts, within a mile or two of the prison? You might meet some of the warders. What brought you here?"

"Business! I wanted some money badly, and I fancied I should get it here."

"When we parted I thought you said you had some scheme on, and were going to make a lot of money? Hasn't it turned up trumps?"

"Not exactly. I've tried my hand at several things—it doesn't matter what. I haven't been in favor, somehow, and they've all fallen through. I've been afraid of showing about, too, till I got this rig. Once or twice I've been nearly landed. It's a weary life skulking in the dark and hiding round corners, shaking at every sound, and thinking every footfall behind you means that you're run down, and next moment will be laid by the heels! I want to get out of it—go abroad. Do you see?"

"Why haven't you gone?"

"Why? Because I haven't had the means, of course."

"But you had money?"

"That's all gone. You should have worked with me, and we would have done well. I could not work single-handed. You're doing well?"

"Tolerably," said Deverel, unmoved.

Spicer grinned knowingly, and thrust his tongue into his cheek. "It was a bold stroke of yours, Dick. I can hardly make out how you dared do it."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you? Come, come; between old pals there's no good in playing at cross purposes. Do you suppose I don't know how you're working the place here with old Benson's bills?"

"With my bills, you mean. Well, what of it?"

"Your bills, since you've got 'em. Do you suppose I don't know how you got them?"

"How?"

"You stole them!"

Deverel was just then drinking another glass of wine, and he sipped the contents deliberately, eyeing Spicer as he did so over the rim of the glass. When he had finished he put it down, and said, "I thought you would come to that conclusion; but you are wrong." And he rose to fill his pipe.

"Do you know why I know?" said Spicer, leaning forward.

"No," returned Deverel, unconcernedly, and turning his back a little.

"Shall I tell you?"

"If you like."

Deverel's back was quite turned now.

"Let's look at your face then," said Spicer, "and I will. That's it! I know, because I saw Benson's pocket-book in your hands the last time we were together."

Deverel made no answer, and there was no change in his countenance.

This pair of rogues, when they played the same game, were a pretty fair match for each other. For bold-frontery, perhaps Dick Deverel was the superior. He showed his superiority now by the next move, and won the game.

"I am not prepared to answer you," he said, "because I do not know what you mean; but it seems to me more extraordinary that you should think I came by Benson's bills dishonestly, and continue to trade on them under those circumstances, than that they should have come into the hands of my employers in a perfectly legitimate manner. You appear to have formed some idea that, because I, like yourself, have been imprisoned for felony, and that I, unlike yourself, have been discharged from prison, you may use your knowledge of the discreditable portion of my past life as a threat to extort money from me. In this, let me tell you, you are wholly mistaken. You know nothing of the creditable portion of my past life, and so can know nothing of the way in which Benson's bills happen to be temporarily in my possession. If you have nothing more to say, I will wish you good night!"

Whilst he spoke, Spicer stared; and, when he ceased speaking, his jaws lengthened considerably.

Rascal as he was, and used to rascals' lies, he could form no opinion as to the truth or falsehood of the bold assertion his old friend had just made. It was very strange if it were true; but it might be true, and, if so, he had played a false card. To repair the past, the best way, as it seemed to him, was to drop the matter for the present where it was. The good old proverb which tells us that "The least said is soonest mended," commended itself to him as peculiarly applicable to his case, and he rose from the chair he had taken uninvited, to go.

"You mistake me altogether, Deverel," he said. "I thought we could have worked together still, and might have been of mutual aid to each other. I didn't come here to get black-mail of you. I'll go now."

"That will be best, as I said when last we met. Our paths in life lie widely apart now, and we shall do no good by keeping company longer. Good night!"

Without making any further remark, Spicer passed out through the bar into the village street. But, arrived here, and in the shadow of the trees, he stamped his feet, and ground his teeth, and swore many oaths.

"The world will get on well without me, that is clear enough. This is the second time to-night I've come begging, and gone away empty-handed, or nearly as bad, when my share was fairly half the plunder! Never mind, Mr. Dick Deverel? I'll be quits with you yet! You'll live to repent you made such a fool of yourself as you have to night!"

The last of Miss Pember's customers was leaving the house at that minute—no other, indeed, than Mr. Rook, the popular London hair-dresser; and something approximating to a love-passion occurred upon the doorstep between this intruder upon poor Pidgeon's rights and privileges and the fair hostess of the "Blue Dragon."

Not wishing to be in the way, Spicer drew back more into the shade, supposing that the tender leave-taking would only occupy a minute or so. For nearly ten minutes, however, did it endure; and Spicer had, perforce, to remain a captive, or betray the fact that he had been watching them from the first.

When, at length, Mr. Rook had really said good night, and gone his way, Spicer breathed a sigh of relief, and was about to go his way also—that is to say, go in search of a bed at the navy's beer-house, which was still open; but, looking up at the "Blue Dragon," a light in one of the upper rooms attracted his curiosity and arrested his progress.

This was probably the room in which Deverel slept. Almost close to it spread out one of the thick branches of the elm against the trunk of which he had been leaning, and the trunk was easy enough to climb.

The blind of the window was not drawn down. He could see into the room.

In a moment he had scrambled up, and, safe concealed by the thick foliage around him, was able to see what was passing within, with little fear of being detected.

What he witnessed brought his night's spy work to a satisfactory conclusion.

He saw Deverel open his pocket-book upon the table, and produce from it a small roll of notes. He saw him also draw forth and count over some twenty gold pieces, and then, having made a packet of the money, raise a plank in the floor near to the fire-place, and stow it carefully away, replacing the plank again, and leaving the hearth-rug over it as it was before.

He saw Deverel smile when he had done this, and that his lips moved as thou he were talking to himself. Of course he could hear no words, but this did not vex him much. He was content with what he had seen, and slowly descended from his perch to the ground.

The words which Deverel had uttered in his soliloquy were these: "To-morrow I must bring all this to an end. With the result of to-morrow's work I will rest satisfied, and run no more risks. If I stop where I shall be then there cannot be much danger, for Spicer can do nothing, as he dare not show his face. To-morrow, then, I make my last ventures. In the morning I will go for the miller's money. In the afternoon I will present the fifteen hundred pound bill."

STEP V.

Mrs. CHALLICE, by some odd chance—for she rarely showed herself at the front of the house—gazing wistfully from the window, saw her daughter and her future son-in-law approaching, and began to smile and nod. The object of the visit was to apprise mamma of the fact that the wedding-day had been decided on forthwith, should she not bring forward some weighty reason for postponement. She had no such reason to urge, and the conversation which ensued was of an extremely amiable character, until Harriet wandered away by herself to walk upon the terrace, and then a grave expression

passed over Charles Challice's features, and his manner grew anxious.

The old lady noticed this directly. During the time he was in her company her eyes were rarely off him.

"You have something to say to me, Charles?" she said.

"Yes, aunt. I have a matter I rather wished to speak to you about—it concerns your son."

"My poor boy who—is dead?"

"Yes."

Perfect silence for a moment or two followed this. She fixed her eyes upon him, as she might have done upon some dreaded spectre. She waited for the words, breathless and trembling.

The disgraceful secret she had so long striven so hard to keep to herself was then known at last, and he was going—

What was he going to do? Had he not awhile ago been speaking of his marriage with her daughter as an event certain to occur within a brief period? What was she to understand?

Whilst she thus waited in a painful suspense indescribable, Challice was slowly unfolding a newspaper he had taken from his pocket, and he now proceeded to read an extract from it.

"This is a sporting paper," he said—"not of the highest class, as you will see. The other day, at Doncaster, as you know, some villain made an abortive attempt to wound, or drug, my horse, and some other miscreant put about a false report that I had been privy to this scheme. The extract I am going to read you refers to the matter. It says—

"We feel quite certain, if proper inquiries are made into the recent attempted outrage in Mr. Challice's stables, it will at once be proved that he was not in the slightest degree to blame for what took place, and that every precaution which could be adopted by him in preserving the safety of Flash o' Lightning had been taken. A report which has been maliciously circulated to the effect that Mr. Challice is in embarrassed circumstances, we are in a position to state is perfectly false. Mr. Charles Challice must not be confounded with Mr. John Challice, late of a cavalry regiment, and well, if, perhaps, not very favorably, known upon the turf. Mr. John Challice, it was said at the time when his horse, Kite, came in a bad third for the Chester Cup, knew more about flying kites than running them. We believe we should not be far wrong in saying that not a few of the kites in question are to be found still dangling disconsolately upon the hands of the misguided, hook-nosed gentlemen who fancied them at the time they were first flown. We suppose they would willingly part with them, now considerably under cost price, if anyone wanted to buy."

When he ceased reading, Challice folded up the paper, and sat a moment, silently looking at his aunt.

"What do you say to that? Is it not infamous? But I will make the fellow eat his words!"

"What would you do?"

"Make him publish an apology, and state publicly that every word he said about Jack is false!"

"That every word is false?" she replied, in a tremulous voice.

"Yes!" he cried, springing to his feet, and striding wrathfully to and fro. "He shall eat his words! I have a good mind to horsewhip him for that matter! Perhaps I shall! How dare he speak of any member of our family in that way?"

"He—he says that a lot of my boy's bills are still unpaid, does he not?"

"If he said only one, it would be enough—it would be equally a lie! Why, you know yourself—or, at least, I should think you know—that he never drew bills in his life! He was going a little fast at one time, and he came to me to ask me, indeed, to lend him my name, and he swore to me then most solemnly that he had never set his hand to paper. I refused to help him in that way. I have always since felt glad I did so. He might have died in debt, and plunged you into difficulties, which it would have crippled your income to pay. No; I knew that Jack was a man of honor. Was he not a Challice? There never yet has been a breath against a Challice's good name, and never shall be while I have strength to stay it! I'll give that scribbling penny-a-liner fellow the awfulest thrashing he ever had in his life, and make him apologize as well!"

He buttoned his coat across his breast with determination as he spoke; and the old lady, fixing a shrinking gaze upon his flushed face and knitted brows, shrank within herself, as it were.

Presently, she summoned up courage to beg of him to moderate his wrath; to do nothing rashly; to take legal advice before acting in the matter.

"Bah!" he cried, passionately; "do you suppose, for all our sakes, for my sake, for poor Jack's, for his sister's, for yours, I can sit down quietly when this wrong has been done? Impossible!"

He left shortly afterwards; and the unhappy mother, sick with fear, watched him depart, then tottered up to her room.

She had not been here very long when Martha found her. On the old servant's features were signs of something new to be frightened at. She was very pale also, and with great difficulty controlled her feelings.

"What is it?" Mrs. Challice gasped.

"There is a strange gentleman down stairs who wants to see you."

"Not?"

"Be calm, my dear—be calm, whatever you do, and keep your wits about you."

"It is someone about the bill?"

"He said he called on business relating to the late Mr. Benson."

THE NINTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH THE WOLF CRIES "WOLF."

STEP I.—THE MAN WHO WAS SENT AWAY.

II.—THE MAN WHO SHOWED FIGHT.

III.—THE MAN WHO RAN AWAY.

IV.—THE MAN WHO HUNG ON BEHIND.

STEP I.

THE old lady found Deverel standing at the open window, looking out upon the neglected garden, down an avenue of which a width of the skirt of Harriet's dress was visible. She had taken out a book, and was sitting there reading under the trees.

His foot was across the window, which opened down to the ground, and he was gazing eagerly in the direction the girl had taken, but, hearing the room door close, he turned quickly round. The old lady silently motioned to him to be seated, and sank into a chair herself, trembling visibly.

After a moment's pause, he opened the conversation. "In the course of business," he said, "I took a number of bills of exchange and promissory notes from the late Samuel Benson, and among others, one drawn by your son, and accepted by Mr. Charles Challice, of The Grange, Haggelord. I find that Mr. Charles Challice does not now live here, and I have learnt, with regret, that your son is dead."

He paused for a moment, and she mechanically said, "Yes, my son is dead."

"I should have presented this bill in the usual way to Mr. Challice," he continued, "had not Mr. Benson informed me that hitherto you had renewed it, and paid the interest yourself. I, therefore, before presenting it to Mr. Challice, thought I would call upon you about the matter."

"You—you are going to present the bill?"

"I propose doing so this afternoon. I should say first, however, that of course I cannot hold over this matter, as Mr. Benson seems to have done. The only transactions I care to entertain are strictly commercial ones."

"Ye-es," she gasped.

"And, to tell the truth, there is something about this that I do not at all care for. Can you settle with me at once, Mrs. Challice? I presume you are prepared?"

It was painful to see the poor lady's distress whilst he was speaking. Her lips quivered, but she could make no reply.

"In that case," he went on, "I will bring the bill here—I have it now at the inn where I have put up—instead of taking it on to the Hall."

With an almost superhuman effort she got back her speech.

"You—you must not do that, sir. For heaven's sake, spare me!"

"Spare you, madam! I do not understand."

"Yes—yes, you do!—you must! Benson must have told you the secret I have struggled so long to keep—You—you must not reveal it now! What do you want? how much? I will give all I have in the world!"

She spoke in a wildly excited, breathless way, and wrung her hands and sobbed. The spectacle of her misery was a dreadful one, and, rogue as he was, he was both shocked and amazed.

"Pray calm yourself," he said; "I'm not unreasonable. What do you mean by all you have in the world? The amount of the bill is only fifteen hundred pounds. You are well off; you might raise the money."

"No, no! it is impossible! I have tried everywhere—mortgaged everything! My son died heavily in debt, and I paid the money! I had reached my last resources when the existence of this bill first came to my knowledge. It has been with the utmost difficulty—you cannot think with what scheming, and contriving, and pinching, and screwing sometimes, I have managed to keep up the payment of the interest that man demanded. But I can do that still. I—I will promise to do so, but you must not expose me. You must hold over. You will—say you will!"

She came tottering towards him, and sank upon her knees, catching at his hands. She was, in truth, half crazy. The violent agitation was too much for her weak frame and overworked brain to bear.

It was, in truth, a pitiable sight—this grovelling misery.

Just then a shadow fell between the two and the light, and Harriet stood upon the threshold of the open window. In another moment she had run forward, and raised her mother from the ground.

"Mamma!—mamma!" she cried; "what are you doing? Who is this man? What does all this mean?"

"Hush, dear!—hush!" the mother cried, in an agony of fear. "Do not offend this gentleman. He represents Mr. Benson. He has brought that bill; he wanted it paid at once, but he will hold over. Beg of him to do so—not to oust and disgrace us!"

Harriet turned on Deverel with flashing eyes.

"Why do you persecute us in this way? You know what power you have. Can you not be merciful? You are killing her. Cannot you see that?"

"No, no!" the old lady broke in. "This gentleman took the bill from Mr. Benson, and he will be reasonable, he says. He will let me go on paying the interest for a little while—only a little while, till your marriage with Mr. Challice, and then I am sure this can be arranged. You will have money at your command. You can help me."

"What do you say, sir?" Harriet asked, turning again impatiently. "You may, perhaps, understand easily the kind of contract that is to be entered into. If you

will extend us a little forbearance, we will pay you well for it."

Whilst the two women had, in turns, been thus appealing to him, Deverel had stood silently by, a prey to a score of conflicting emotions.

At length, however, one seemed to get the mastery, and he spoke—his eyes, when he did so, being fixed upon the ground.

"You altogether mistake me," he said. "I had no idea that your mother was in such straitened circumstances. I had heard of your marriage, and I understand now the sacrifice you are making. I have followed you, and watched you these three days past. I was in the wood yesterday, and on the lawn last night when you came to the window."

She started, and her cheeks flushed suddenly crimson.

"Why have you done this? What is your motive? I do not understand." But as she spoke, she laid her hand upon his arm, and looked full into his face.

For a moment he shook like a leaf, and his features quivered painfully. She was astonished, and waited for him to break the silence.

"May I speak to you for a moment?" he said, with an effort.

The old lady was half-sitting, half-lying upon the sofa, and did not seem conscious of what was passing around her. It was not a time to consider abstruse questions of propriety. She felt that she must hear what he had to say, and followed him to the window.

"Have you ever seen me before?" he asked, abruptly.

"Yes," she said, after fixing a steady gaze upon him. "I know you perfectly now; but the last time we met I did not at the moment recognize you. You were the dancing-master at the school at Chiswick."

"Yes. Do you understand me now?"

"No. How can I?"

"Did you never hear why I left the school?"

"Never?"

"Did you hear nothing of it?—ask nothing?"

"I was exceedingly sorry. We were all very sorry. We liked you much. One of the governesses said you—you—that is—"

"Said that I had been turned away?"

"Yes; that was what she said. I did not like to repeat it."

"It is quite true. But did she not say why?"

"She did not."

His looks dropped again to the ground, and he seemed to be wrestling with himself. At this minute the old lady's voice was heard within, asking in querulous tones for Harriet and the gentleman.

Deverel now spoke rapidly.

"It is as well, perhaps, you should not learn now, as you did not know then. I owe you my life—that is enough reason for my doing what I am about to do. I owe you my life, for you saved me when we met last from the hands of the mob, who would, like enough, have drowned me, else, like a rat, in return I will destroy this miserable piece of paper, which is now happily in my possession; or, better still, I will bring it here to you. There will be an end then to your mother's sufferings on that account; there will be no further occasion for the sacrifice you would make. You will be free then, and—I'll go and fetch it."

He entered the room quickly, and caught up his hat, and without heeding a renewed prayer from the old lady that he would give more time, passed on to the passage door.

Here he paused, however. "You will explain what I have said;—that I will right this cruel wrong that has so long gone on—that henceforth the persecution will cease. In half an hour, at the latest, I will return."

He passed out then, and next moment was walking rapidly away. Harriet watched him until he had turned the corner of the road, and then ran to her mother's side, and flung her arms round her, and burst into tears.

"What is it all?" the old lady asked. "Why are you crying?—what dreadful thing is going to happen now?"

"Nothing! nothing! Cheer up, mamma! I am crying because I am so happy!"

"Happy!" said the mother, with a bewildered look.

"Happy! Why?"

"Did you not hear what the man said?"

"Yes; I heard."

"In half an hour's time he is to bring the bill here, and we are to destroy it. In half an hour he will return."

The old lady shook her head.

"He will never return!" she said.

She spoke the truth there. He never did.

STEP II.

BUT Harriet could not believe there would be any slip between the cup and the lip in this case; and until she knew for a positive fact that there was no cause for rapture, her younger heart would rejoice. She had lately been sad enough. There might be no farther necessity for giving up so much. Things might happen very differently now to what threatened only a short hour ago.

Half-an-hour was not a long while to wait.

Before a quarter of an hour had passed away, however, her brief dream of happiness received a sudden shock. Captain Everest's servant brought a letter for her, to which there was no answer. The man was in a hurry, he told Martha, for he had to catch the train, and must give the letter into her young mistress's own hands.

Harriet was on the terrace in the garden when Martha came to her. She came out and took the letter from the valet, then returned to the garden to read it, wondering not a little. She knew the handwriting, having seen it before in an album at the Hall, but this was the first letter she had ever received from him. It was thus:

"My dearest,—for you are my dearest, and you must let me call you so this once, as I shall never have a chance of doing so again."

She gave a gasp, and pressed her hand upon her heart. For a moment the words upon the paper seemed to swim confusedly before her eyes. She could make nothing of their meaning.

"I have been thinking over what passed between us," the letter went on, "when I met you the other day in the shrubbery, and of several things you then said, and at other times. You are making—or you think you are making—a sacrifice in marrying Challice, and it would be mean of me to pretend I do not know one reason why you would not have carried out that arrangement were there not other reasons why it should be carried out."

"I should think it very rarely happens that a man is placed in so awkward a position as that I find myself in just now, when I have to search for as many reasons as I can possibly find to prove to you that you would be wrong in breaking with Charles, and thinking any more of me."

"I described to you briefly when I saw you last that my circumstances were in a very unsatisfactory state. I have since then gone more seriously into the question, and, I am sorry to say, find my situation to be even worse than I fancied."

"I have, therefore, determined to sell out at once, and pay my debts as far as I can, and set to work to make money enough to satisfy the remainder as soon as possible. What I am to set to work at I am not at the present moment quite sure of, for mine, as you may suppose, has been, at best, but an idle, useless life, and real work has formed no part of it. However, this is a mere detail, and not worth bothering you about. I only wish to show you, my dear little girl, what an utterly ineligible man I am, and one whom no young lady in your position ought for a moment to dream of."

"On the other hand, I know Charles Challice loves you as much as a man can love a woman—not in my way, perhaps, but in an upright, honest fashion of his own; and I believe, if you were to jilt him now, it would be so heavy a blow for the poor fellow that he would be completely crushed by it. But then I am sure you are good and reasonable."

"For my part, I must clear out of this with as little delay as may be. I am here in a false position—a beggar on horseback—nothing else—who could not very easily pay his valet's wages, if asked for them too suddenly. I have made an excuse, and leave here to-day, very shortly after you get this letter. I should dearly have liked to say good-bye to you, but I am too great a coward, and dared not do so by word of mouth. I don't think I could have kept my wise resolutions had I done so."

"I say good-bye this way, then—and you must forgive me. We will meet again a year or two hence, perhaps; and then I believe you will think that what I do to-day was best done. Bless you, dearest, once again—dearest!"

"ALFRED EVEREST."

The half-hour appointed for Deverel's return passed into an hour, and yet there were no signs of him.

The time had passed somewhat quicker to the daughter, her mind being occupied with her sorrow; but the mother had waited silently, like a statue, looking at the face of the clock, monotonously ticking off the leaden moments.

All at once, Harriet was aroused by old Martha calling to her in a frightened voice.

"Miss Harriet, come—come quickly! Your mother—I can't make her speak!"

The girl sprang from the ground, where she had been sitting on the grass, and followed, with a scared face, into the room where she had left her mother awhile ago.

"Will you stay with her, miss, while I run for the doctor? Isn't it dreadful? What shall we do?"

No efforts that they could make to arouse her had any effect. The old woman, suddenly becoming a shapeless kind of wreck of what she had been only a little while ago, sat huddled up, nodding her head, and mouthing dreadfully.

No words containing any gleam of sense or meaning escaped her lips. Her pale gray eyes stared blankly into space. Her brain had been too severely tried for some time past.

"Something had given way," Martha said the doctor had told her.

STEP III.

MR. SPICER passed a sleepless night after his interview with Deverel at the beer-shop near the railway-station, at which, with some trouble, he was able to procure a bed.

Had anyone been there to see they would have found him, by the hour at a stretch, lying on his back, staring fixedly at a chequered pattern the moonlight threw upon the ceiling over his head. Mr. Spicer was plotting and planning. He saw his way dimly to a very good thing, but only dimly as yet.

Early next day he set off for the miller's house, and hung about in the neighborhood, waiting for his old jail companion to appear. But he waited in vain, for Deverel had accidentally met with the miller by the way, and their business had been satisfactorily transacted at a roadside public-house. Therefore, after hanging about, and fretting and fuming for more than a couple of hours, Spicer had the mortification of seeing the miller return alone, and concluded that either the money had been paid or was not going to be paid that day, and that, in either case, it was no good waiting any longer.

However, as he plodded in gloomy silence along a pathway in the wood, which led back to the high street of East Haggelord, he met Deverel on his way to The Grange, where he was going to seek the interview with Mrs. Challice, which has already been described.

Deverel would, perhaps, have passed him by, but he blocked the path.

"Dick," he said, "I've been waiting for you a goodish long while."

"Indeed!"

"Well, yes. You didn't suppose that you had put me off that way, did you?"

"I didn't think anything more about it, Spicer," the other replied. "I said plainly enough that we couldn't work together—I couldn't get on with you. What more do you want?"

"Well, now I'll speak to you fair," said Spicer, in a low voice, but with his eyes fixed upon Deverel's with a curious expression; "I want my share."

"Your share?"

"Yes."

"What's that?"

"Half what your making—not a penny less. I'd have gone much cheaper last night, if you'd thought it worth your while to make a bargain; but you didn't, you know. You drove me off then. Now my terms are higher."

"But suppose I refuse?"

"You won't act wisely if you do that," said Spicer, with a meaning smile. "You'll regret it."

"Well, that's to be seen. I do refuse, anyhow!"

"You do?"

"Yes."

As he spoke, Deverel fixed his eyes sternly upon the other, and held them so a full minute without flinching. Spicer shuffled uneasily.

"Let me pass," said Deverel; and he raised his hand to wave him on one side. As though he had been a dog, spoken to by its master, Spicer slunk out of the pathway, and silently let his old friend move forward.

But when Deverel's back was turned towards him he made a sudden spring, and caught him round the throat in the fashion that the garroter seizes upon his victim.

Unluckily for himself, however, and luckily for Dick Deverel, he had not well calculated his distance in making the spring, and had not made good his hold, so that they fell together heavily to the ground.

A short, fierce struggle ensued. Spicer was the heaviest and strongest man, but Dick the most wiry and active. In less than two minutes Dick was the uppermost. Then, panting for breath, he said, as he wrenched with both hands at the other's handkerchief, so that his face grew more purple and swollen: "Look here; I've a good mind to choke the life clean out of you, and I would now if it were worth while. Let the thing end here, will you, and let me go my way? I tell you I will not be partners with you, and you have no right to ask for a share of my earnings; and I owe you no debt of gratitude, for it was your cowardice and treachery that got me into a cell in the same jail as yourself. Now I spare your life this time. Get up and go; only understand, once for all, don't cross my path or interfere with me again, or it will be the worse for you!"

Spicer got up and shook himself, and looked crestfallen and sheepish enough.

"Very well," he said; "you'll regret this, that's all! You'll regret it when it's too late! The game you're playing, Dick, is quite a poor one to the one you might play if you'd got the cue I could give you. Never mind! You threw me over. You'll live to repent it."

"Very probably. Will you go, I say?"

"Oh, yes; I'm going."

And so, without any further effort at conciliation, Spicer took himself off, turned his head when he had reached the brow of the hill, and seeing that Dick still stood where he had left him, and gazing after him, he turned again, and walked quietly away.

When he was out of sight, Dick turned quietly towards The Grange, and, as he walked along, pondered upon the probable meaning of some of the words the other had spoken.

"The game I'm playing is a poor one, compared to that which I might play if I had got the cue he could give me! What does he mean by that? Bah!—nothing. What could he mean? It's all empty talk!"

He walked along for some time, muttering to himself and did not pause until he was within half a dozen yards of The Grange gates; but here he stopped to breathe and to compose himself.

"This is the end of my game," he muttered. "Poor as it has been, according to Spicer's way of looking at it, it has been good enough for me. Here I play my last card, and then I have done with it for good. Let those who like to do so, go and take it from where I leave off!"

With these words, he approached the door, and knocked.

We are familiar with the result of the interview. We know how the love he bore for Harriet Challice came between him and whatever schemes he might have been hatching. We have seen, cold, calculating scamp as he was, how his deep passion for her overcame all other feelings within his breast, and that under its influence, he was as weak and will-less as a baby.

Within an hour of the time when he crossed the threshold of Mrs. Challice's house, he was hurrying with all the speed of which he was capable to Miss Em Pember's inn, where, in a place of safety, beneath the floor of his bedroom, he had concealed the bills and money, including the forged bill which had been the cause of so much misery so far—which was destined to cause greater misery still.

Passing by the bar without any question, Deverel hurried up stairs, entered his bedroom, turning the key in the lock when he had done so. It was twilight without, and in the room it was dark, but he knew exactly where to lay his hand upon the place of concealment he had chosen to hide his treasure in; and

opening a clasp-knife, knelt down, and slipped the blade within the cracks to turn up the loose piece of plank. When this was done, he thrust his hand into the hole, and felt for the pocket-book.

Next moment his face would have formed a study some painters would have given a good round sum to get a glimpse of.

His eyes dilated widely, his jaw fell. Large drops of perspiration burst out upon his forehead. Then he gave a kind of cry, which was more like that an overtaxed and suffering dumb beast might have made, and he threw his hands up to his head.

In an instant he was wildly searching his pockets. This done, he fell again upon his knees, and plunged his hand into the hole, widely spreading out his fingers, but finding nothing. Again he got up, and with the aid of a box of matches on the mantelpiece, struck a light, and made a closer examination of the place.

Nothing was there. The hiding-place was empty.

He had been robbed.

With features white and ghastly, his hair tumbled wildly about, panting and breathless, he rushed down stairs to the bar, where Em Pember gave a cry of terror at the sight of him.

"What in the name of goodness has happened?" she exclaimed.

He pressed his hand upon his heart, but for a moment he could not speak.

"Give him a drop of brandy," a man said, who was sitting at the bar; and when it was handed to him, Deverel gulped down the raw spirits.

"Some one has been up-stairs!" he said. "My money has been stolen! More than four hundred pounds—all gone!"

"Four hundred pounds!" echoed the man, in astonishment.

"Yes, yes!" continued Deverel. "Over four hundred in notes and gold, besides bills—most valuable bills—worth several times that amount. But I will have it back! I will hold you responsible. I—I—"

"Calm yourself a little," said the man, approaching nearer, and staring hard at Deverel.

"I can't see how ever you could have been robbed in my house," cried Miss Pember. "We don't harbor robbers here—at least, when we know 'em. Mind what you are talking about, sir, if you please. Where did you leave your money?"

"I left it up-stairs. I put it in a hole under the hearth-rug. It was all safe there a couple of hours or so ago. I left it there, you know, before I went out last."

"If you left it there, it must be there now. There's not been a soul in the place except this gentleman and the sailor, who had a glass of rum, and wanted change for a sovereign. Besides, you know him!"

"You mean the man who called here for me last night?"

"Yes; he asked for you again."

"Ah!"

"He said you had appointed to meet him here, and he would wait for you; but afterwards he went away, and I think he said he knew where you were, and would meet you on the road."

Deverel gave a groan. He saw it all now, and wanted no further explanation. It was Spicer who had robbed him; and by this time had, no doubt, made good his retreat with four hundred pounds, a pocket full of bills of exchange and promissory notes; and, above all, the forged note, of which, happily, he did not know the value.

But he knew enough, however. All would be turned to profitable account; and who was to prevent him working the little gold mine, as Deverel had done? Deverel, perhaps. Well, that was not feasible.

It was a ticklish business, even when he had undisputed possession of the paper. But how could he dare to dispute another's right to it? No; the game was up. He had played it boldly, but to what end? All that remained of his ill-gotten gains was something less than five pounds, now jingling in his trousers' pockets. He could have cried with rage.

Meanwhile, the man in the bar had been staring at him very hard, indeed.

"That was a queer thing for you to do, to hide your money under the floor," he said. "It don't sound quite commercial, you know. Why didn't you give it to the landlady, here, to lock up for you?"

"Because I chose to do what I did do!" replied Deverel, fiercely. "That has been my loss, hasn't it—not yours? What has it got to do with you?"

"I'm not so sure it hasn't something to do with me, Richard Deverel!" the other said. "I'm a little surprised to hear you have the handling of such large sums of money, and I hope you came by them in an honest manner, that's all. Pray, have you reported yourself lately?"

For the first time, the ex-dancing master and ex-jail bird had a good look at his questioner, for until now he was naturally so excited by the loss he had sustained, that all other subjects for alarm had clean gone out of his head. He now saw that he had got to do with no less a person than the head warder, whom he had encountered at the gipsy's camp that night when Spicer broke loose from prison.

Like a flash of lightning the thought came to Deverel that the place where he just then found himself, might, before many minutes had passed over his head, turn out a good deal too hot to hold him, and he made a step towards the door.

"Yes, I have reported myself," said he. "No one has a right to interfere with me; I'm doing no harm."

"All the better for you, then," retorted the warder, sullenly. "It's not, rightly speaking, my office to mix myself up in the business, so you've nothing to fear from me, but I shouldn't get up a hue and cry if I was you. I shouldn't cry wolf, you know!"

And he smiled significantly.

Deverel had sense enough to see he would be safer outside the house than in it—and, indeed, there was no

Reason why he should stay any longer; indeed, it was now a question whether he had money enough to pay his bill—certainly not money enough to spare.

When he was outside the house, Em Pember turned eagerly to the warder, and asked what was the meaning of the words he had just used.

"He's a ticket-of-leave man," said the warder, briefly.

"Good gracious! mercy me!" exclaimed Em Pember. "I might have been murdered in my bed! But, sir, you don't know what he has been doing! He has swindled the whole town! Why, he—he!"

"What?"

"He has even swindled me!"

"Out of your bill, do you mean?"

"Out of a bill."

And then she told the warder what she knew of Mr. Deverel's recent transactions, and how he had been going about with the late Mr. Benson's bills.

"And me to trust and believe him, like a greenhorn that I was! From what I knew of him, I might have seen that he was really nothing but an imposter. I wish they had drowned him when they had him in the mill-stream last time—that I do!"

"Oh, he was ducked, was he? I think I recollect hearing something of that. Wasn't it when the steeples-chases were run?"

"Yes."

"Wasn't that when Benson was here last?"

"Yes; when Mr. Benson was here last. He died here, you know."

"Benson and this fellow were here at the same time?"

"Yes; I did not know there was any connection between them, though."

"No more there was. This fellow must have stolen Benson's pocket-book, somehow."

"To be sure! And to think that never entered mine or anyone else's head! Do you believe it true he has really been robbed?"

"I don't know. It's just likely. But what were you saying about a seafaring man? I want to know every particular; that's why I came here, in fact. I rather think I know something of a party of that kind who has been skulking round about the neighborhood for the last three or four days."

STEP IV.

It would be difficult to describe our luckless rogue's feelings as he walked quickly down the village High Street, on his way to the railway station.

It was his intention to make inquiries there about Spicer, and to follow in pursuit if he could see any kind of chance of catching the thief.

Besides, without that, what could he now do better than run away himself, whilst he was quite safe? Had he not lost all? What good could there possibly be in hanging about round the scene of his disaster?

He entered the railway station, and made inquiries of the clerk. Yes, there had been a seafaring man who had gone by the third-class train to London, which had started about half an hour ago.

When was the next train? In half an hour's time there was the express. Would that reach London much after the other? It would overtake it on the way.

Deverel at once resolved to go. He could not have a ticket just yet. He must wait another ten minutes. To pass the time away, therefore, he strolled out into the High Street and lounged about round the door, busily occupied with his own gloomy thoughts.

From the contemplation of the blank future in store for him, he was suddenly aroused by the loud talking of some men approaching, and he heard his name mentioned. The lamps were lighted outside the station, and their light fell upon the face of the head warder, and upon the regulation uniform of two local policemen. He did not require any broader hint of what might be in store for him, but turned tail and ran for it.

He dived through the station, crossed the line, and clambered up the embankment on the other side. Here his pursuers—for they had come after him, sure enough—saw him, and gave chase.

The embankment was some fifteen feet high, and very steep; but our rogue was as nimble as a cat. With astonishing activity, therefore, he began to scramble upwards.

Here and there the slender stem of a bush or shrub gave him something to catch at rather than catch hold of; and holes, which the martins had made in building their nests, served as stepping-stones; but when the others would have followed, everything seemed to crumble and give way under their weight, and a kind of overhanging cornice surmounting the whole came crashing down with the warder and five others, bruising them badly.

This incident gave the fugitive a fresh start, and he dashed his way violently through the thicket growing up above, tearing himself loose from the tough brambles of the blackberries, which seemed almost as though they were in league with his pursuers, and were striving, too, to take him prisoner.

And now he was in the open country, and out in the moonlight. Meanwhile, three out of the party giving chase had mastered the steep clime, broken their way through the thicket, and now sighted him with a vigorous view halloo.

The sound lent him fresh strength. He was at all times an excellent runner, and had more than once before been compelled to take leg-bail, so he dashed on with all his might across a turnip-field, then over a hedge, and across some mangold wurtzel beyond.

One of the three giving chase broke down at the hedge, and cried off. The second, who had cleared the hedge, loudly vociferated, "Yoicks!" but the third impatiently bade him keep his breath to blow his porridge with, and come on.

On they ran, therefore, silently, side by side for the next two hundred yards.

Then one said, "I wonder if he can jump at all."

"Why?" asked the other.

"Well, there's a stiffish brook on ahead."

"Where?"

"Right in front. Can't you see the moonlight on the water?"

"Deuce take it, yes! and I'm not half sure I can clear that!"

Deverel was not, seemingly, frightened by the obstacle. He summoned all his strength, and went at it like the shot from a gun, landing safe and sound on the other side.

His pursuers weren't quite so lucky. One cleared it all right, with just a trifling stumble; but the other flopped in about half a yard short of the opposite bank, and the successful jumper turned to help his friend out of the difficulty.

Deverel here rashly pulled up and looked round, thinking he had beaten them both, but a moment afterwards they were on their legs again. Was he never going to distance them? They were two raw-boned, bull-necked fellows, with a tremendous lot of stay in them yet; and, what was worse, the others were also gaining on him from a side direction.

He began to quake, in spite of all his pluck.

Just at that instant, though far away, a sight greeted him which gave him fresh heart. Far away in the distance he could see a bright red light, and heard the rattle of the express coming towards him.

What if he doubled on the course he had taken, and run for the station? After all, he might get away by the train. Resolved to try this, he collected all his energy, and put on a final spurt.

The train came shrieking on, and he flew once more across the water with the speed of a deer.

"Oh, hang it all!" cried the two late pursuers, in the same breath. "It can't be done! The man's a perfect fiend!"

The bell was ringing now at the station. It would be a near squeak for it, even if Dick managed to do the trick at all.

He did not pause to think of this, but dashed on. One more flying leap cleared the palings by the platform, but the train was on the move.

Not very fast as yet, but gliding steadily on. He did not hesitate a moment, but rushed after it, and grasped at a piece of ironwork on the last carriage. Heaven only could tell how he managed to keep his hold, and clamber and clutch; but at length he had contrived to fix himself on some rickety kind of perch, and was borne away into the darkness.

The officials at the station shouted loudly, but he took no heed; and the warder and one or two others looked on aghast.

Thus, then, for the second time, the ex-dancing-master left East Hagglesford. What fatality could possibly bring him there again? What power urged the unfortunate wretch to come back once more, and meet the cruel death in store for him?

What power but that one which has brought about so much mischief since the world began—the power of love!

It was this man's love for a woman who had never loved him, and never would, that led to the cruel death I have to tell you of in a coming chapter of this story.

THE TENTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH BLAIR'S MAN TURNS UP.

STEP I.—PIDGEON IN GRIEF.

"II.—PIDGEON IN EXTREMES.

"III.—THE CAPTAIN LAUGHS.

"IV.—THE CAPTAIN BREAKS UP.

STEP I.

SOMETIMES little people as well as great people may have their troubles, particularly love troubles. Mr. Pidgeon, among others, had his, and found them very hard to bear.

Barber's business in East Hagglesford was just about as bad as it could be—at least, according to Mr. Pidgeon's experience of it. There had actually been a third barber's shop started, the proprietor of which did things in a terribly slap-dash style, and was much patronized by the lowest class of operatives, whom the dreadful railway had brought down to the place in swarms. Rook, at the first opposition shop, strange to say, did not seem at all put out by the new-comer's presence, though he charged only a half-penny, whilst Rook charged a penny for a shave. And presently it leaked out somehow that Rook had put the man in as a spec., and that he meant to buy up poor Pidgeon, or beat him out of the field altogether. When Pidgeon heard this, he swore a big oath.

Among several bad habits Pidgeon had contracted lately, swearing must be numbered as one, tipping in the morning another, and betting on races a third.

There was a time when the idea of a professional betting man settling down to live in East Hagglesford would have created a small panic, but the new line, had connected the once happy village with a sporting town, round which were innumerable trainers' stables; and sporting gentry, more or less respectable, were now continually to be found on the line, at the station, and hanging about the taverns in East Hagglesford, making private inquiries about the four-legged inmates of Charles Challice's stables, of which his now famous Derby crack was one concerning which they were particularly anxious to obtain a little information.

At a new red brick tavern, with great plate-glass windows which were for some time the wonder of beholders, and which rejoiced in the name of the "Rail

way Arms," many tight-legged gentlemen were in the habit of meeting together; and here Mr. Pidgeon got into the practice of taking a nip or two in the morning, and another nip or two later on, and a lot of nips at night, and of occasionally venturing a shilling or two on some "event."

Meanwhile, a willing-minded but luckless lad was left in charge of the shop, and maimed and mangled many unfortunates who trusted themselves into his hands.

This bright specimen, locally famous as Foxey, by reason of his silliness and his sandy hair, soon acquired for Pidgeon's shop the nickname of "the shambles," about which the East Hagglesford wags made very merry.

"I'd rather not try it," one said; "I haven't insured my nose." And another said, "That was his case too; and, besides, he had bought half a dozen new pocket-handkerchiefs, and didn't like the idea of wasting them." Both good enough jokes in their way, but extremely hurtful to our Pidgeon's commercial prospects.

Trade, therefore, got slowly, but surely, slacker and slacker; and Foxey not having any customers to hack about, and finding time hang heavy on his hands, would go out for half an hour or so, and have a game with the other boys, during which diversion the shop took care of itself, and at last some one came in, made up a neat little packet of razors, fancy soaps, and other things, and walked off with them.

One day, about noon, Mr. Pidgeon got out of bed with a splitting headache (he had had many nips over night), and found ruin staring him in the face. Not literally, it is true; for what was staring him in the face from the looking-glass was, in reality, a wild and haggard Pidgeon, with a tumbled head of hair and bloodshot eyes.

But, financially, Pidgeon was in an awful bad way, and he could not see how he was to get out of his difficulties, unless he got a heap of luck somehow, and how was that to be? There was only way in the world—the right horse must come in first, and that was all.

Mr. Pidgeon felt in his pocket and found a suspicious halfpenny and an unlikely-looking half-crown, which was all he had in the world, and he was a week behind with his rent.

Putting on his clothes with no little pain and trouble, he descended slowly to the shop, clutching his aching head with one hand.

With a dismal sigh, he looked into the till, thinking it just possible, but not at all probable, that there might be something there; but, with the exception of a few old bread crumbs, it was quite empty. Foxey generally kept the bread and cheese he brought from home in it till dinner-time came.

"A till ought to be a safe place, it's true," said Mr. Pidgeon, making the most doleful of jokes; "but, hang it all, not that kind of safe. Where's that young rascal got to, I wonder?" he continued, after a while. "I wonder what he has taken this morning? Whatever he has taken, he has taken it with him in his pocket. Perhaps he's done a fine stroke of business, and he's bolted with six beards and half a dozen heads of hair in his pocket. I wouldn't answer for him! How ill and bad I feel, to be sure! I wish he wouldn't carry the money in his pocket! I do so hate hot coppers!"

A knock on the counter just behind him made him turn his head. It was the postman with a letter, and twopence to pay.

"What!" said Pidgeon; "what's that for? Is it some new kind of regulation?"

"Not that I know of," said the postman. "Can't you see that there's no stamp. I say, though, I can't take this half crown!"

"Isn't it a good 'un? It looks all right!"

"I can't take it, anyhow!"

"I must owe you the twopence till to-morrow, then," said Pidgeon, seating himself, with a sigh; and, when the postman had gone, he listlessly turned over the letter.

"Dash it!" he exclaimed. "Why, here's the stamp on the other side; he's used it as a wafer! Hallo, I say! Stop! I've been cheated. By the way, though, I did not pay—I forgot. Now, let's see what Tommy Potts has got to say for himself!"

Tommy Potts was a sporting gent, who betted on commission, and who had been intrusted with some gold coins belonging to our barber, with elaborate instructions as to the way they were to be laid out.

This letter, doubtless, contained information respecting the way that these orders had been executed; and Mr. Pidgeon eagerly opened it, taking care, though, not to injure the stamp; but just as he was going to read, another knock came on the counter.

"Hallo, Pidgeon!" cried the familiar voice. "How goes it this morning?"

"Not very bright," the barber answered. "I went it a little last night, didn't I?"

"You went it a goodish bit, it seems to me!" the other replied; "stood treat all round! There's a rare score against you this morning!"

"I don't remember anything. I must have been going it?"

"You remember giving me the odds against Grass-hopper, I hope? Anyhow, if you didn't book it, I did; and you took care to take my pound, and spend it like a man!"

"Did I take your money?"

"Rather!"

"And spent it?"

"Like a perfect gentleman! You stood glasses round."

"It strikes me, Chouser," said Pidgeon, with a half groan, "I really must have been going it last night!"

"Well, you did, I won't deceive you. It ain't every beginner would have the pluck to give forty to one in sovs against a boss like the Grasshopper."

"Forty to one in sovs! Good gracious! if he were to win!"

"Well, I hope he will."
 "Do you? Oh, ah! to be sure—yes—I see—because, then, I shall pay you."
 And he fell a reckoning the number of shaves it would take to realize that amount.

"Well, there's nothing like going it!" said Chouser, with an approving smile; "that's what I say myself. Have you got to-day's paper by any chance? I want to see what's the betting about Daddy Long-legs. That's your tip for the Shuffle-and-Cut Handicap, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, it is," replied the barber, cautiously, for his head was aching so badly, his words could not follow his ideas with the rapidity he would have desired. "There ought to be a paper, certainly; and it's a most extraordinary thing that a person can't lie abed three or four hours later than usual without injuring his business. Where the deuce has that boy put the papers? Where has he got to himself?"

"The last I see of him," said Mr. Chouser, "he was playing hi-spy-hi with some other boys round the corner."

"Oh, he was, was he?" cried Pidgeon, with considerable indignation. "I'll hi-spy his eye for him when I lay my hand on him, so I don't deceive you!"

It was not, however, by any means an easy matter to catch hold of Foxey under such circumstances; so, seeing him coming in the distance, Mr. Pidgeon artfully concealed himself behind the door, armed with an umbrella; but as it so happened that Mrs. Pegg, from next door, chanced, by some fatality, to enter Pidgeon's shop a moment in advance of the boy, who politely stepped back to give way to her, the result was scarcely what could have been desired.

STEP II.

THE just indignation of Mrs. Pegg having been somewhat allayed only by the most profuse and abject apologies on Pidgeon's part, she retired, without, however, making the purchase (a pair of side-combs) she had intended to make, and Pidgeon, watching from his door, saw her enter the opposition shop of the hated Rook.

This almost finished poor Pidgeon, and, in a fit of impotent rage, he struck out right and left among his fancy soaps and scent-bottles, and danced upon the fragments scattered on the floor.

But his cup of bitterness was not even then quite filled to the brim, for while he was yet panting from his exertions, and clutching his aching head in his hands, Mr. Rook himself walked into the shop.

The bold effrontery, as it seemed to Pidgeon, of this proceeding quite took his breath away. He gasped, but could not speak.

"You've got a boy called Foxey, I think?"

"Well?" said Pidgeon, with a supreme effort.

"Well! it is not well," retorted Rook. "He's been out there, in the street, throwing stones, and he's broke my window. I shall have to bind him over to keep the peace, and you too, sir; for I daresay it was you set him on!"

"Me!" echoed Pidgeon, livid with rage, but struggling to be calm. "Keep the peace yourself, if it's any good to you, and don't come bullying here! I'm not well to-day. I've no change now. I'll send over to you."

"I've no doubt of that," replied Mr. Rook, blandly; "and, talking of payments, I believe you have not paid your rent!"

"What the deuce has that to do with you? I think your remark is very impertinent!"

"Pertinent, my dear sir! if I may venture on a correction."

"Impertinent, I said! You're not my landlord's agent!"

"Well, not exactly!"

"Very well, then; what business is it of yours?"

"Every business! You see I've been investing a few of my little savings in house property about these parts. I'm thinking of pulling this row of ugly old houses down, and running up a new terrace. I'm not your landlord's agent, for the very simple reason that I'm your landlord. I've just had the property transferred to me. Here are the particulars on this paper, if you care to drop your eyes over them. Being my tenant, therefore, I'll thank you for your rent immediately!"

"Oh!" said Mr. Pidgeon, with a face as long as a fiddle.

"Yes; I'll trouble you either to stump up or stump out!" replied Rook; "otherwise to cut your stick. And the fact is, Mr. Pidgeon, I should prefer the latter; for, you see, there is really no room for so many barbers' shops in this town; and as, of course, I am going to stop, you're, consequently, going to go."

Mr. Pidgeon's long pent-up rage boiled over, and he stamped up and down the shop. He would, probably, have flown at Rook and tried to take his life, but Rook was a big, strong man, and Pidgeon was not, so he only threatened.

"I'm going to go, am I?" said he. "This is a sort of Gunpowder Plot, is it? and you're a sort of Guy Fawkes? But look here, Mr. what's your name?"

"You'll find my name on this paper, if you look at it. Everything is quite right and proper. I take immediate possession."

"I don't care for your name, sir, nor for you either!" retorted Pidgeon, somewhat vaguely. "Do you think I don't see through you, though, and understand all your game? I'll tell you what it is, too! It's Em Pember! I'll tell you why you want me gone—because I stand between you and Em Pember! Ah! you may writhle! You can't rub that off! She doats on me! She may have winked one eye at you: she winks both at me! She don't care half a pin for you! I'm sorry for you! I'm sorry for you!—ha, ha! Excuse my laughing. It's a matter of perfect indifference to me, of course, but she really don't admire you. Excuse my mirth; I can't help it."

"Oh, certainly," replied Mr. Rook; "have your laugh out, by all means. Never mind about Miss Pember, though, just now. You pay me my rent—that's what you've got to do! I told you to cut your stick, but perhaps you won't very long have any sticks to cut, for I shall send a broker in in the course of an hour or so. And as to Miss Pember—ha, ha!—I say, with respect to Miss Pember's love for you—ho, ho! Excuse me. Good morning!"

Mr. Pidgeon sank back into the shaving-chair, and groaned. "He'll sell me up to a dead certainty, and marry Em Pember, unless Daddy Long-legs wins the Shuffle-and-Cut Handicap to-day, but that's a certainty also. Where's Tom Potts' letter got to, I wonder?"

But while he was yet searching for it, the brokers arrived.

STEP III.

CAPTAIN ALFRED EVEREST rode up to town in a first-class smoking carriage, and read the newspaper assiduously. What he was reading about he had not the remotest notion, but he still read on mechanically, his thoughts being far away from the subject immediately before his eyes.

At last, with a weary sigh, he let the paper fall, and stared out of window upon the flat, marshy country through which the train was passing.

Here, at rare intervals, were dotted about solitary cottages of a poor, mean kind; and at the door of one of them, near the line, a gaunt, raw-boned woman stood, staring blankly at the passing train. Down a long, dismal road, which ran straight into the horizon, and stopped short there, a boy was patiently waiting until a pig he had to drive home would make its mind up which way he would go; and he appeared to have any amount of time upon his hands, and to be quite at the pig's service—a happy state of things, not unusual in pig-driving, as pig-drivers will tell you.

A little farther on, a man with a basket on his arm sat on the top of a five-barred gate, and swang his leg. Perhaps he had been sent out marketing, and somebody, a long way off, was getting violently impatient for his return, but he was in no hurry himself; and long after the express had sped schreeching past, he probably still sat there, gazing stolidly at nothing, and swinging his leg in the same methodical manner he was doing it then.

Everest laughed a short, abrupt laugh, and leant out of the window to have a good look at the man on the gate, and kept his eyes fixed upon him until he dwindled down to a tiny speck in the far distance.

"How odd that I should be flying along in this mighty hurry!" he said, aloud. "What on earth have I got to hurry about?"

The prospect before the captain was certainly a very unpromising one. A man does not generally begin life again very hopefully at the age of thirty. Before that, he is supposed to have shaken down into some kind of position. He ought even to be getting on a little.

As Captain Everest leant back once more on his soft-cushioned seat, he laughed again.

"That fellow on the gate was deuced funny," said Everest. He had the carriage all to himself, and could talk aloud if it pleased him so to do. "That boy with the pig, too; and the woman at the cottage door. How do such people exist? What a life!—yet, after all, one that can be endured, and it is better than mine. Some of these fossils attain a great age and pass away gently, and all is forgotten about them but the one fact of their great age, which is set forth proudly on a tombstone, if their relations can afford one. I have no relations, and probably shall not have a tombstone. I have nobody to love me, except one who must not; and no one to cry about me when I am dead, except one, who will most likely, forget me by then, and not cry very much, if at all. My life has been a very great mistake, like lots of other people's lives, I dare say. I might have done something once. I don't quite see what I can do now—but smoke!"

He drew his cigar-case from his pocket—a very costly kind of luxury, richly ornamented with a gold crest, and he smiled bitterly as he gazed upon it. "A man must be a contemptible fool to buy anything of this kind, and carry it about with him," he said. "And this crest, too, is surely the most contemptible part of the whole business! What earthly right have I to a crest of any kind? None at all! What am I? Who am I? An officer and a gentleman! That's an empty kind of phrase, sometimes. There are so many shady gentlemen, and one can't live and feed oneself upon the mere fact of being a gentleman, without extraneous help. Halloa! Confound it!"

This exclamation was made to himself and under his breath, and was called forth by the entrance of another man into the carriage. There were two reasons why this circumstance put our captain out. One being, that he would have traveled alone; the other that the intruder was about the last person in the world he would have chosen to travel *tete-a-tete* with. The intruder was a red-faced, rather dissipated-looking man, carefully dressed, and wearing a showy ring upon the little finger of either hand, and a showy pin in his scarf. He wore lavender kid gloves, which fitted him tightly and were perfectly clean; he carried a slim cane with a silver top, and tapped his polished leather boot with it.

He was about forty, perhaps, and appeared older, even, when you looked at him very closely; otherwise, his clean-shaven cheeks and carefully cut hair gave him a somewhat juvenile appearance. He was an inch or two over the regulation measurement round the waist, perhaps; but to remedy this he wore a belt, which could almost be called a pair of stays, for it was stiffened by numerous whalebones, and artistically shaped. The title of this person was Sir Roland Wagstaffe, but he was familiarly known as Sir Roly, or Roly Wag. He was the eighth baronet of that name, and the seven pre-

ceding baronets had all, more or less, distinguished themselves in some way.

Sir Roland had not shone in any way, however—rather the contrary—and that was why Captain Everest drew back involuntarily as he entered, and dropped his eyes.

To avoid looking at Sir Roly, Everest then busied himself in very carefully cutting off the end of his cigar and moistening the outer leaf with his lips, and, whilst so occupied, thought to himself, "Confound the fellow, why could not he have got into some other carriage? He must have seen me here, and knew that I would not speak to him."

There were a good many men about town who did not particularly care to speak to Sir Roland, in spite of his fine old title and his careful get up. There was not exactly anything known against Sir Roly, but he was generally put down as a bad lot, and it must be owned that he looked like a bad lot.

Mr. Dod's volume was judiciously silent respecting Sir Roly's private address, and he was equally reticent upon the subject himself. On his card was the name of a second-rate club, and he told people to address letters to him at a hotel in Covent Garden, where, at long intervals, he stayed for a night.

It was not distinctly known whether or not he was married, but a report to that effect was current, and that he had run away from his wife, or she from him—people are very careless in stating which way it is in these cases, and don't seem to think it much matters. And some had circulated a report that she was employed as a ballet-girl in one of the large theaters. Sir Roly never mentioned the subject, and Mr. Dod's volume was silent upon that point also.

As to the means by which the eighth baronet earned his living—for he had not a farthing's-worth of landed property, save in that sense where "landed" means stolen—it was said that he hung about the clubs, and picked up green young gentlemen with expectations, whom the West End money-lenders wished to deal with, and the money-lenders paid Sir Roly a handsome commission for these little services. Once he was pointed out as "Blair's man."

Blair was a tremendous scoundrel, who had been the ruin, it was said, of scores upon scores of young men, but he was an extremely pleasant person to speak to. He was of no particular profession, and called himself a private gentleman. He owned one or two horses that ran with varying success for small races, and he thus made acquaintance with many gentlemen upon the race-course, whom, otherwise, he could never have got to speak to in his life.

Men like Everest, belonging to a good set, looked with a shudder on such men as Blair and Blair's man, and, as a rule, would not speak to them for the world.

Just now, though, our Captain found himself forced, by circumstances over which he had no control, to speak to Sir Roly, and to thank him for his proffered kindness. The fact was, he had cut off the end of his cigar, and prepared it for lighting; but, on opening his little silver match-box, he found it to be empty.

This was extremely awkward. He could not very well put his cigar away again, because he knew Sir Roly was smoking himself, and had his eyes fixed upon him. Whilst he was hesitating what he should do, Sir Roly helped him out of that difficulty, and plunged him into another, by addressing him by name, and saying: "Allow me, Captain Everest, to give you a light."

Everest took the proffered fusee, and bowed stiffly. He was in a great rage with himself to think he had done an act which thus placed him in a position in which he could be spoken to. He thought, too, that the way he had been addressed was a great piece of impertinence, and would have liked to throw Sir Roly out of the carriage window.

As this, however, would certainly have been going to extremes, he lit his cigar in silence, and puffed at it viciously.

"It's awkward to be without matches," said Sir Roly.

"Yes," replied the Captain.

"I always carry some," said Sir Roly.

The other made no remark.

"I saw you at Doncaster, I think," persisted Sir Roly.

"I was there."

"Splendid horse that of Challice's. I suppose you backed it heavily?"

"I did not bet at all."

"Indeed! I should have thought, as a friend of Captain Challice's, you would have backed it through thick and thin."

"I don't bet."

This was said in a tone of voice which was clearly meant to imply that Sir Roly's conversation was not desired; and, as he spoke, to make the thing plainer, Everest took up his newspaper again, and began to read.

The Baronet smiled slightly, and looked out of the window. He did not appear to be any way abashed by this shut up. He certainly did not seem at all angry or annoyed. Most likely he had been extinguished in this way tolerably often before.

But at the end of ten minute's silence, Everest was much annoyed with himself, thinking, perhaps, with some reason, that his own behavior was not a little snobbish, and wondering what on earth he, a beggared man, had got to be so proud and particular about.

He was just making up his mind to open the conversation afresh on his own part, when the train stopped at a station on the outskirts of London, and Sir Roly got out without looking towards him again.

Everest flung himself back in his seat, and went on smoking.

"The fellow's a cad, that's true enough," he thought; "and most likely a 'leg' too; but, good gracious! why should I be so precious squeamish? I can't mix in the company I have kept, that's certain. I sha'n't be able to pick my company, I take it. I might have been civil to the fellow. He was civil to me, and he could not

have robbed me—I've nothing worth taking to be robbed of."

This was not literally the truth, it may here be observed; for, as a good many people in the world might have thought, the captain's gold watch, and his cigar-case, and ten golden sovereigns in his waistcoat pocket, would have been very well worth having—would, indeed, have been a very good haul. They would, for instance, have been quite enough to have tempted the late Mr. Muller, who, with a lesser temptation, perhaps, thought it worth while to kill a man, and risk being hanged; but, as we have seen, our Captain had been accustomed to despise trifles.

He could not as yet wholly realize what it was to be without a shilling in his pocket. He made up his mind he was ruined, of course, and a beggar; but meanwhile he was smoking a fourpenny cigar, and it did not occur to him that there was anything at all extravagant in this proceeding.

STEP IV.

THE Captain dined at his club when he arrived in town, and had a bottle of good wine with his dinner. Then he sauntered into the smoking-room, and threw himself into an arm-chair.

A friend of his was lolling in another arm-chair at some little distance. No one else was in the room. The two men nodded, but did not speak.

After, however, the Captain had passed a short time in silence, he said, "Is it true, Courtney, you were hit rather hard over the cup the other day?"

"Slightly!" replied his friend. "Dropped five thou!" and he went on smoking, Everest doing the same.

"That won't ruin you!" he said, presently. "You'll get it all back on the next event."

"Daresay."

"I say, old fellow," the Captain continued, "supposing you were really ruined—lost every stiver in the world—what would you do now?"

"Blow my brains out!"

"Nonsense!"

"Why so? What would be the good of living without money? You see, I've been used to having large sums all my life, and to spend a lot of money, and I could not live without it. Yes, I should blow my brains out—I've settled that long ago!"

"Ah!" said Everest, "that never occurred to me! I dare say you're right, though. Good-night!"

And he got up and went away.

"Good-night!" said his friend, languidly, and closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Everest went home to his chambers in Jermyn street, sent Mr. Johnson, his trusty valet, to bed, and went to bed himself, dreaming that he had gone to the diggings, and found an enormous nugget, which he had placed under his pillow. When he woke up, he instantly felt under his pillow for the nugget, and found it was not there, then he yawned and rang for his bath. He dressed very leisurely, and drank a split soda and brandy, and smoked a cigarette, and walked round his rooms thoughtfully, with his hands plunged deep into the pockets of his dressing-gown.

Both rooms were furnished with excellent taste, and there were some pictures, bronzes, and bits of old china, which would have made any amateur enthusiast; but there was no crowding and jumbling up of costly odds and ends. There were flowers in the windows, there was a piano, and there were plenty of books.

There was a tale, too, of some sort attached to almost every article the room contained; and as Everest slowly made the round, the things seemed dumbly to appeal to him. He sighed, and sat down to breakfast.

It was not the breakfast of a ruined man, nor did he eat as if his mind were ill at ease.

"Give me a glass of curacao, Johnson, if you please," he said, when he had done, and sipped the liqueur leisurely. "Johnson," he said, presently, "do I owe much money?"

"Pretty good lot, sir, I think," said Mr. Johnson, imperturbably.

"How much would you say, now?"

"Far as I know, sir," replied Mr. Johnson, after seeming to calculate for a moment, "about five thousand five hundred."

"As much as that?"

"Quite as much as that—as far as I know."

Everest lit a cigar.

"Far as you know is probably the full extent, Johnson. By the way, how much do I owe you?"

"That's a trifle, sir; and there's not the least hurry for that. I'm sure."

"How much is it, though?"

"Well, fifty pound, sir—fifty pound and a few shillings."

"I ought not to have got into arrears like that. I'll let you have a check for it to-day."

"Thank you, sir!"

Mr. Johnson still lingered in the room, and played with the knives and forks at a side-table, evidently hoping to be spoken to again.

"Have you got any other place in your eye, Johnson, if I have to give you up?" Everest asked, after a pause.

"Beg pardon, sir!"

"If we have to part company, I mean. I don't think I shall be able to keep you any longer."

"I'm sorry to hear that, sir, I'm sure. I have always done my best to afford you satisfaction, sir, I trust."

"Certainly, you have. It is not because I complain of you—I have nothing to complain of. Only I can't afford to keep a valet at all. I am going to sell my commission, and sell my furniture, and probably go abroad."

Mr. Johnson went on playing with the knives and forks at the sideboard, turning something over in his mind.

Presently he coughed, and advanced a step or two. "Excuse me, captain: I hope there's no offense, but if you're going to sell up this little place, and will put a

price on it, I'd like to do a deal with you, if we can agree. The things is nice enough, but wouldn't fetch much scattered. I've a bit of money put by I've no immediate use for."

Captain Everest took his cigar out of his mouth, and stared harder at Mr. Johnson than that gentleman had often been stared at before his life through.

"Go to the deuce, you impertinent vagabond!" said Everest; and Mr. Johnson discreetly left the room—by the door.

The Captain had received that morning a letter from his agent, saying that, according to his instructions, his commission had been sold, and the amount paid in to the Captain's credit at Glyn's. The net sum would, of course, by no means reach the figure at which Mr. Johnson had estimated the Captain's debts; and the sale of the furniture, pictures, &c., unless they fetched fancy prices, was not likely to make up the deficiency. However, Everest, not being a broker or a broker's man, did not quite know this as yet, but was in any case resolved, somehow or other—the how he was rather vague about—to meet his difficulties, and pay everybody off at twenty shillings in the pound.

During the day he went round to the tradesmen he owed money to, and asked them to send in their bills immediately. Most of these bills arrived by the first post next morning. Some were delivered by hand that very day. During the next three days the Captain sent his brougham and horses to Tattersall's, and called in a broker to value his goods.

The broker's appraisement of these differed so greatly from the value the Captain himself placed on them, that the latter was at first inclined to send him about his business, and put them into an auctioneer's hands.

He hesitated about this, however, thinking everybody in all the world would know about him and his affairs.

Upon reflection, though, he thought he would send for another broker, and hear his valuation. But the second broker was worse than the first, and he fancied he saw Mr. Johnson chuckling covertly.

He, therefore, paid Mr. Johnson his arrears of wages, and gave him a certain equivalent instead of the usual notice; and the valet retired from the scene, wishing his late master better luck.

"Thank you, Johnson," replied Captain Everest. In about a fortnight everything was sold off at a much lower price than the Captain could at first have believed possible, but it was most plausibly explained that the particular time of the year when the sale was effected was really and truly the very worst time that could have been chosen to sell such property.

With what he got, however, he paid, was able to clear out, and that, after all, was all he wanted to do. He paid everybody the money he owed them, the last amount being his tailor, as it happened.

This worthy person—his name was Gosling, and his place of business in Old Bond Street—seemed very much surprised at the receipt of the Captain's check, and turned it over and over in his hand.

"Is not that all right?" Everest asked, uneasily. He was afraid he had made some mistake, and left out a unit, which would have been very awkward indeed in the present state of his finances.

"Oh, its all right enough, Captain," Mr. Gosling said; "but—but—you're going to leave off dealing with me; I'm deuced sorry for that."

"The fact is," said the Captain, "I'm hard up and I must—"

"You are hard up, and you pay me!" gasped Gosling. "I never heard of such a thing in my life before!"

Everest laughed.

"I'm cleaned out," he said. "I was thinking of going abroad, and starting fair."

"Don't talk like that, sir; you take my breath away. Would you mind stepping into the little back room there?"

The captain followed him.

"You won't be offended at what I'm going to say, Captain, will you?"

"Not at all. Say on."

Mr. Gosling fidgetted uneasily for a moment or two, and scratched the back of his head, as rustics are wont to do when some one in broadcloth, with a tall hat on, talks to them. Then going at it with a kind of rush he said, "Well, look here, sir? There's not the least occasion to settle up this little account for the next six months, if it will be any convenience to you to let it stand over; or suppose you'd like it settled, if anything in the shape of a little bill, or say your I. O. U for a hundred?"

"No, no, Gosling, thank you!" replied the Captain, shaking his hand warmly. "You're a deuced good fellow, Gosling, upon my soul you are; but I won't do it. I don't want that."

"Well, you know best, sir. Some other time, perhaps. You'll have your clothes of me, sir, won't you? It's always been a pleasure to me to dress you. Some of my customers ain't worth dressing—they're not, sir, really. I don't mean that their money isn't good enough, but they're no credit to one. You'd fit a walking-stick with as much pleasure."

"I don't want any new clothes just at present, thank you, Gosling," said the Captain, smiling.

"But you'll come to me when you do, pay or no pay. Do you promise?"

"Yes, I promise!" And with this Everest took his departure, and walked very slowly down Bond Street into Piccadilly, with a serious face. All this was rather harder to bear, it seemed to him, than the real, actual poverty would be when he came to experience it somewhere a long way off, where no one knew him.

"Yes," said Everest to himself, "I must get away—I must get out of this. I want to be moved right off directly. I can't stand this slow process—it's too painful! I'll start to-morrow morning! I have five pounds left, and that will take me—out of the country, anyhow!"

Involuntarily, on reaching Piccadilly, he had crossed the road, and began to stroll down St. James's street, towards his club, and it was not until he reached it, and looking up at the bow-window, saw three or four men there whom he knew well, and who nodded to him, that he suddenly remembered he ought not to continue his club life any longer, and that every shilling of his last five pounds might be very necessary to him presently. He therefore nodded hastily, and passed on.

Making his way along Pall Mall, towards the Strand, where, in Northumberland street, a week previously, he had hired a modest lodging to accommodate him whilst he remained in London, he was almost knocked down and run over by a hansom dashing round the corner of Waterloo Place unexpectedly upon him.

Starting back just in time to save himself from the wheels, he struck the back of his head against the lamp-post, knocking his hat off, and he stood half bewildered, to find himself a moment afterwards supported by the strong arm of the Sir Roly Wagstaffe whom he had snubbed so decisively in the train about a fortnight before, on his way home from Haggelford.

However much the Baronet might have felt Everest's uncourteous treatment of him at the time, he showed not the slightest trace of vexation now.

"My dear sir, I trust you're not hurt?" Then, addressing the careless driver, who was making off as fast as he could: "You scoundrel! you ought to be pulled down off your seat, and thrashed within an inch of your life! I'd have those fellows hanged, if I'd my way," he continued to Everest. "Lean on me. Never mind the fools staring. You'll be all right in a moment. I rejoice I came up, or the next moment you'd have been under the wheels."

THE ELEVENTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH A WILD BEAST BITES.

STEP I.—BLAIR.

"II.—BLAIR'S DAUGHTER.

"III.—BEAST.

"IV.—BITE.

STEP I.

FEELING still somewhat confused from the shock he had received, Everest could not decide right off whether this were or were not the truth, but took Roly's statement for granted, and thanked him. The recollection that he had been rude towards the man, and rather repented of it afterwards, inclined him also to a show of gratitude, which was, perhaps, more than the occasion warranted.

No man in the world better knew how to take advantage of such a circumstance than the Baronet; and, directly afterwards, he had locked his arm more securely in that of his companion, and was leading him along. A cab was close at hand, which Sir Roly hailed, and half-helped half-thrust him into it.

"You must have a glass of brandy; that will set you right. There's my club close at hand; or, if you like it better, a quiet tavern round the next street."

With some recollection of his old aversion to being in Sir Roly's company, he now elected to go to the quiet tavern, instead of the club, by which latter proceeding he would, as it were, be openly acknowledging himself to be Sir Roly's friend.

It only took a minute or two to get to the tavern, and here the Baronet insisted on alighting himself, and leaving Everest in the cab, whilst he went in to fetch the liquor. Everest felt a little better when he had drained the glass handed to him, and then, Sir Roly taking his seat again by his side, said, "Where shall I drive you? Have you any engagement for to-night, by the way? I wish you would let me take you to Cordery's place at Clapham. You know Colonel Cordery, I think? One or two men dine with him to-night in a quiet way. No dressing necessary, and any friend of mine would be very welcome."

Everest only slightly knew the person mentioned; had met him once or twice, and heard of him as a famous traveler, who, it was rumored, was starting upon an expedition to the interior of Africa. It all at once occurred to the Captain that here might be had just what he wanted, perhaps, with only the asking. Colonel Cordery was a man of great wealth, and a capital fellow. He might be in want of some one who had been to Africa to join the party. It was, therefore, an extremely lucky thing that he had thus met with Sir Roly, and Sir Roly was a friend of Cordery's. He could not then, after all, be such an outsider as he, Everest, had thought at first.

When Sir Roly had asked where they should drive to, Everest did not like the notion of giving his address in Northumberland Street, and, for a moment, thought of naming the Charing Cross Station, where he might have pretended he had an appointment. But now he answered without hesitation.

"I have no engagement at all. I shall be happy to go with you."

Sir Roly's face beamed with a broad smile. "I'm awfully pleased at that," he said. "This cab can take us on. Over Westminster Bridge," he said to the cabman, "and up the Clapham Road."

As they traveled along, Everest soon got over the temporary uneasiness the accident had occasioned him, and fell into an easy chat about things generally, but more particularly the expedition upon which the Colonel was about to start.

In reference to the subject of their conversation, Sir Roly's information seemed to be boundless, and, in some respects, varied from what Everest had heard from other quarters; but then Sir Roly, who, according to his own account, had been consulted in the matter from the very commencement, ought to have known the rights of the case, and Everest was more and more pleased he had met him. Besides, he could not help owing to himself he had before this been very unjust-

ly prejudiced against his new friend, who, by his style of conversation and the sentiments he expressed, seemed to be a perfect gentleman, and Everest made up his mind that in future he would not rush rashly to a conclusion. More than once, too, he said to himself, "Why should I have been afraid? I had little to lose then—less now."

They pulled up, after half an hour's ride, in front of the carriage gates of a large house in the high road, and, after some delay, the summons brought a servant out to answer them.

"Colonel Cordery?" said Sir Roly.

"He's not at home, sir."

"He won't be long, I suppose?"

"He's not in town, sir. He went to Dover last night."

"Went to Dover last night!" echoed Sir Roly, apparently much astonished. "Why, he asked me here to dinner to-night! You know me. Here's my card."

If anyone was inclined to doubt the baronet's good faith, the servant's face would, perhaps, to some extent have strengthened the suspicion he might have had. However, when he had read the visitor's title upon the card he softened somewhat, and though, if the truth must be told, he had never seen Sir Roly before in his life, he made some kind of token of half-recognition.

"It must have been a mistake, sir," he said.

"Rather an awkward mistake, I call it," and Sir Roly laughed boisterously, and with that he returned to Everest.

"Captain Everest," he said, taking the other's hand, and speaking with some emotion in his voice, "upon my word I don't know how to apologize to you for bringing you here on this wild goose chase! I don't know what Cordery will have to say for himself, but it really—yes, it does, really, at this moment, seem quite unpardonable." Here he pulled a letter out of his pocket and mumbled the words to himself. "Yes; there's no mistake about it; I never blunder in these matters, for I do think such mistakes unpardonable. Captain Everest, a thought strikes me. We will dine together, after all, if you will do me the honor. A dear old friend of mine lives close at hand, within a stone's throw. You must let me introduce you."

Everest was, as it were, in a lasso, and did not quite see how he could extricate himself. He by no means desired the promised introduction, and would have given something to get out of it, but he was not at the moment able to think of a good excuse. He hesitated, and he was lost.

At Sir Roly's directions, the cab turned to the right off the common, and drew up before a very pretty villa, in front of which there was a garden all aglow with masses of scarlet geraniums. The French windows of the dining-room were open, and a glimpse was thus obtainable of a sumptuously furnished apartment, and, beyond that, a back garden full of old trees was visible through the windows of the other end of the room.

Sir Roly jumped nimbly out of the cab, and, followed by Everest, entered the house, where it was evident he was very much at home, and quite at his ease.

"Tell your master," said he, pointing to a man-servant in blue and silver livery, plush, and hair powder,—"a kind of creature one would not have expected to find vegetating anywhere meaner than a ducal mansion—" tell your master that Captain Everest and I have come to dine with him."

Everest, startled somewhat by this free and easy style, said, as soon as the servant had gone out of the room, "That's rather taking your friend by storm, isn't it? Will he like it?"

"He's the oldest friend I have in the world. He won't be offended a bit. He'll do anything for me—let me do anything to him. There are not many like that, eh?"

"No," replied Everest, shortly. Somehow, the words, and the way they were said, seemed to him very vulgar. He began again to wish he had not entered.

"By the way," he said, "you did not mention your friend's name, I think."

"Oh, Blair," said Sir Roly, carelessly. "I dare say you know him by sight. Everybody knows him by sight—few intimately. You will like him very much when you do."

Everest knit his brows, to think. The name seemed very familiar to him, and associated with something by no means pleasant.

"You don't mean Blair, the—"

What Blair it was that Everest would have alluded to there is no saying, for the sentence was broken off suddenly by the entrance of the person about whom they were talking.

This was a man about fifty, with gray hair and piercing eyes, so dark, they seemed at first sight black. He had the blandest smile you can conceive, and the whitest and most regular teeth.

His eyes first impressed you with a kind of dread, but if you got over that, his smile charmed you. He was a very agreeable talker, and wondrously smooth-tongued. Most young men went away delighted with him after their first interview; and older men, who ought to have known better, and had been warned that Blair was the worst of bad form, excused themselves for having been found in his company, after being remonstrated with, by saying something like this: "My dear boy, he's the biggest scoundrel living! I'm sure of that, but he's the best company I ever met; and as to his cook, there is not another cook after you've mentioned him! I know half a score of fellows who would give him three or four hundred a year, right off to-morrow. Where do you think it is Blair keeps him? Why, he keeps him in a cellar in irons, with a chain riveted to him! He has him carefully guarded day and night, and will never let him out for a second to breathe the fresh air, and he gives him a thousand a year!"

The greater part of this was nonsense, of course; but there was no doubt about one thing—Blair was rolling in money; and according to the popular belief, he made it all by the clever tricking of young men of property, brought into his web by various agents and touts in his employ—our friend the baronet being counted among the number.

Why he maintained a kind of position among men of honor, and was, to some extent, countenanced by them, was that nothing positive had ever been brought home to him. He was one of the best suspected men alive; but after a score of charges of "robberies" on the turf, of "nobbling" horses, "squaring" jockeys, "making matches safe," he had come off at last with not precisely flying colors, and with not exactly "no stain upon his character," but the evidence had gone to pieces, and the verdict was "Not proven."

There was another reason, too, why Blair not only kept his head above water, but held it high when he walked on dry land. *He knew such a lot!*

People said if Blair chose to "let out half what he knew," Tattersalls' would close next day! He could chop down a score of the proudest titles, and roll them in the mud! Many men met him with a cold shudder, and nodded with a kind of galvanized corpse-like grin. But they were compelled to notice. He would have that. He exacted it; and it was not well to quarrel with him!

As he entered, Everest saw that the man in whose house he thus found himself a self-invited guest, or something very much like it, was, indeed, the notorious Blair he had heard so much of and seen occasionally. He certainly would very much have liked to beat a retreat; but how could he do so? He ought not to have allowed himself to be brought there in that way. Now he was there he could only stop—to do anything else would have looked very foolish.

"I am please to make your acquaintance," said Blair, extending his hand, showing his teeth, and smiling his very sweetest.

Everest took his proffered hand.

"I need never do this sort of thing again," he thought; "and I shall be out of it all in a few days. After all, it does not much matter."

"It is quite a chance we are here, Blair," said Sir Roly; "but you know you told me to drop in whenever I am near this end of the world; and don't let me deceive you, your *cuisine* is enough to tempt a man a good long way out of his road to taste it. Everests will say so, I'm sure!"

"I hardly think our intrusion, unasked, is very fair," said Everest, hoping he had found an opportunity to attempt an escape. "Some other day I shall be happy to—"

"No, no," said Blair; "you must stop to-day. I must insist upon it. It will really be an act of charity. I invited two men, and they have disappointed me; and worse than that, disgusted my *chef*, who, having lavished the experience of a lifetime in the preparation of a choice little meal, which will be ready to be served in two minutes' time, is simply furious. If I cannot find somebody at once to taste and approve of the results of his efforts, I shall—well, I shall leave him. I think the man will be mortally offended, and leave me for good!"

Everest, with a kind of suppressed groan, gave himself up to his fate, and determined to enjoy himself as much as possible. To tell the truth, the prospect did not seem to be the very worst in the world; and, after all, he said to himself once more, for his private satisfaction, what did it matter, and why need he be so wonderfully particular?

There certainly was no exaggeration about Mr. Blair's description of the promised meal, though whether or not his story of the expected guests had a single word of truth in it is very doubtful indeed. The *chef* this time most surely had surpassed himself, unless he were a very magician in the culinary art. The choice of dishes was perfect, and each in its turn exquisitely cooked. Sir Roly was loud in his praise, and Everest did not sit dumbly by, and let these master-pieces pass unnoticed.

As for the host himself, he found time not only to eat and drink, and to talk as well very amusingly upon a hundred and one subjects—he never mentioned a word about sporting—but he also contrived to see that his guests' glasses never stood many moments empty.

As the twilight gathered around them, a crowd of wax candles were quietly lit about the room by the watchful, soft-footed servants. The curtains were closed over the windows looking out upon the high road, but the other windows, from which were seen the garden at the back, remained open, and the perfume of the fresh watered flowers was wafted towards the three men as they leant back in their chairs, indolently sipping Blair's incomparable old port.

Everest was quite astonished when, at last consulting his watch, he found it was past ten o'clock.

Then he rose, and said he must go. Blair placed his hand upon his guest's arm.

"You must stay for coffee," he said. "It will be ready in a moment, and I have some of the best curacao in all the world. Will you come out into my garden? The moon looks pretty through the trees there, does she not, shining down upon the flowers?"

Everest walked through the open window, and stood upon the lawn. Blair offered him a cigar, and struck a wax match for him. As he raised the light to the cigar end, the sound of a woman's voice singing struck upon his ear. At the first bar, he paused, and, with half averted head, listened attentively.

Blair was by his side, watching him. He had his hand once more upon his arm.

"A very pretty air that," he said. "Unusual, eh? I don't remember ever hearing it before."

"Heard it a great many times when I was a child," said Everest, "but never since. My nurse sang it, I think. Some one who might have been my nurse, or

my mother, I don't know which now; never shall know."

"How can you be sure of that?"

"What do you mean?" asked Everest, turning on him quickly; but the other was unmoved, and imperturbably puffed at his cigar.

"I mean nothing particular," he said. "We never know, though, do we, what the next day—the next hour may bring forth? That's a good old phrase. Look here."

He took Everest's arm, and led him half a dozen yards away from the dining-room window to another window belonging to a richly-furnished drawing-room, and made a motion with his head towards the interior.

Everest looked.

There, at the piano, sat the woman he had heard singing—a beautiful woman she seemed to him—her figure graceful, her features refined. She wore a dress that seemed to trail in rich profusion upon the carpet round her feet. It was cut low, and on her white bosom a heavy necklace of diamonds blazed like sunlight. On her arms were jewels also, and on her fingers which languidly swept the keys.

She was still singing, and apparently thinking herself alone and unobserved, was throwing her whole heart into the song, so that in its last lines there was a fearful tremble in her voice.

"What a lovely woman!" said Everest, involuntarily.

"Shall I introduce you?" asked Blair; "she's my daughter."

STEP II.

AN hour and a half later on in the evening Captain Everest again looked at his watch, then rose hastily, and, with an apology for staying so long, rose to go.

Blair, who had been absent from the room the greater part of the last hour—all of it, perhaps; Everest had not noticed it—returned at the moment.

"Where is Sir Roland?" said the Captain, suddenly recollecting he had forgotten all about his late companion.

"He has gone away," replied Blair, with a quiet smile. "He felt rather ill, he said, and begged me excuse him to you."

Everest, on hearing this, was in a still greater hurry to get away, thinking that he had probably overstayed his welcome; but, when he said something to this effect, the host hastened to assure him that such was not the case, and, following him out of the hall, shook hands with him with great cordiality.

"You are not going away from England yet?" Blair said. "You must come and see me again before you go. I fancy Cordery's party is made up, and if so, I could do something with him. Where can I see you the day after to-morrow?"

Everest hesitated.

"At your club, shall we say?"

Everest did not quite approve of this arrangement, for two reasons—one being that he did not want to visit his club any more; and the second that he was not desirous of being seen there in Blair's company.

"Or will my club do?—or, better still, why not come here, and we'll be alone; that is, my daughter, myself and you. We can talk it over then."

Involuntarily, Everest glanced back towards the drawing-room. The door was open, and he could see Miss Blair standing by the piano, in much the same place that he had left her on making his adieux. She was patting the ground with the tip of a black satin shoe, her dress gathered back with one hand. The light fell upon her face, and upon the jewels sparkling on her white neck and arms.

Everest hastily gave his consent to the proposed arrangement, and hurried away.

As he walked along, he had a good deal to think of. To begin with, his new friend, Sir Roly, was a very different person indeed from what he had pictured to himself that he would be, and Blair was altogether the reverse. The question was, was Blair really such a miscreant as he had been represented?

"He never speaks to a man without thinking how he can pick his pocket!" Everest had heard these very words used in connection with him. Was there any truth in this damaging statement? Blair was a rich and highly successful man. No wonder if he had plenty of enemies!

Mr. Blair might have meant very well. His motive, for instance, in saying that Sir Roland had gone away might have been perfectly innocent, but, nevertheless, he told a falsehood! As soon as the street door had closed on the Captain, Sir Roly came forth from the dining-room.

"It's all right, eh?" said he.

"Pretty well!" replied the other, closing the dining-room door upon his daughter as he spoke. "You've done your part well enough. You've brought him here. That's all I wanted of you. I can manage the rest."

"You won't forget your promise?"

"I have not. There are four twenty-fives! Give me your I. O. U.!"

Blair drew the money from his pocket, and handed it to his "man," who pocketed it greedily, his eyes glistening; and shortly afterwards he took his departure.

Then Blair went back to the drawing-room.

The girl was standing thoughtfully by the piano. She turned suddenly as he entered, and her features wore an expression of mingled grief and anger strongly marked upon them.

"Papa," she cried, "who is this man? Why have you brought him here? Is not he the Captain Everest I heard you say the other day was ruined?"

"Yes, he is."

"What do you want with him, then?"
 "That's my affair, dear. I don't want to hurt him; don't be afraid! Is not it time for you to go to bed?"

STEP III.

MEANWHILE the object of this little conversation was making the best of his way homewards.

Everest somehow felt a certain amount of interest in knowing whether Mr. Barlow's new employe had arrived, and, learning that there were yet several trains to Victoria, and, being in no hurry to get home, he waited, too. But they both watched in vain. The down train, the last that night from the place where the expected lion-tamer resided, did not bring him among its passengers. No one alighted at York Road. The menagerie proprietor's face wore a woful expression.

Everest was more interested still. He could not possibly have said why. Such odd things had, however, occurred to him that day, and he had mixed in such strange company, why not mix in stranger still?

"Mr. Barlow," said he, "I'm very sorry you are disappointed, and I should very much like to be of some service to you if I could. I can't lay any claim to lion-taming; but I've killed a tiger or two in my time, and I've had one as a pet. It's in the Zoo now. I made them a present of it when it got too big for the drawing-room. Let's have a glass together over at the house opposite, and a talk."

Mr. Barlow seemed pleased to have met the Captain, and graciously accepting his invitation, they partook of some liquor together in the bar of the public-house alluded to, and smoked a cigar. There were only a bench and a table in the place, and on the former they seated themselves, whilst Mr. Barlow entered into rather a lengthy memoir of the late Bill Jenkins, interspersed with other matters of an autobiographical character, and wound up by emphatically striking the table with his fist, and exclaiming, he would give a hundred pounds of hard money, that minute, if he could bring Bill to life again.

"Unfortunately," said Everest, "that could not be done at the price. You must get some plucky fellow to take his place."

"I wish I knew one," said Mr. Barlow; "I'd pay him well."

At the other end of the table, whilst they had been talking, a man sat sleeping or dozing, with his head resting on his arms; but when Mr. Barlow struck the table, it aroused him, and he stared at the speaker sleepily.

He pricked up his ears at the last words.

"I've pluck enough; but no money. I've had to do with wild beasts before now. I'd like to try my hand, if you're willing to let me."

Mr. Barlow looked rather doubtfully at the stranger, but his face assumed a more satisfied expression after a few moments' scrutiny. The man, a hatchet-faced, piercingly bright-eyed fellow, though not heavy, was powerfully built, and probably, very wiry and active.

He appeared to be in good condition, and well fed. His clothes were shabby, but not ragged. He wore a faded flower in his button-hole, and a ring on a finger of his left hand.

"You've had to do with wild beasts, eh?" said Mr. Barlow. "Handled any tigers? Where do you hail from? Wombwell's—Jamrach's?"

"I danced in a pantomime at a place outside one of the barriers of Paris—one of the little theaters, you know. The Dompneur at the Cirque was laid up with a bad bite. I took his place for ten days or a fortnight. I almost forgot his name just at the moment—it's some years ago; Del—something. He was an Englishman."

"Delamonte!" shouted Mr. Barlow, delighted. "He was at the Cirque five years ago; I remember well; and he was bitten, it's true. He's told me of it, and the man who took his place; a proper daring fellow. I forget what he called himself."

"Deverel is my name."

"Come on to the tent," said Mr. Barlow, delighted, and let's see what you can do. Will you have another glass first; and you, Mr. —

"Deverel."

They all three rose, and stood at the bar, Mr. Barlow being the center of the group. At his suggestion, they clinked their glasses "ally Fransey" as he called it, he clinking first right and left, and the other two leaning forward afterwards to touch their glasses together. As they did so, Mr. Barlow stared at them both with a good broad stare, and broke into a broader grin.

"This is as queer a start as ever I come across," said he, "and I've seen a few queer ones in my time, too! It was so odd I should meet this gent," jerking his hand towards Everest; "and that he should feel an interest in wild beasts; and that we should get talking, and come in here; and that you should overhear us, and turn out to have known poor Bill, and worked for him; and that I should just at this blessed moment be regular gasping to get hold of some one of your sort! Something ought to come of this."

Something did come of it, too, but hardly what Mr. Barlow expected.

STEP IV.

THEY went now, without little delay, back to the open space where the show stood, and on which such exhibitions may be not unfrequently met with, no opposition being offered by the authorities to their erection on an otherwise unoccupied, barren piece of land.

Barlow threw back the canvas door, and they entered the show, the interior of which was lighted only by a couple of candle ends guttering down into the sockets, stuck upon a wooden hoop hanging from the ceiling, so that the greater part of the place was plunged into a dim obscurity. The visitors could, however, after a moment or two, easily discern surrounding objects. The cages were not all fitted up yet. Some men were

hard at work fixing one of them in a distant corner, and the hammering they made while thus occupied disturbed some of the animals already caged, and they growled, or squeaked, according to their nature.

There were also some large packing cases, five or six feet high, scattered about, and one of these was already underneath the hoop filled with the candle ends.

"Here she is!" said Mr. Barlow, tapping the case with his walking-stick; whereupon such a terrific roar burst from the interior, that every other beast in the place took up the cue, and added its mite to the general discord.

The men in the corner left off the hammering very suddenly, and faced round to see what was the matter, and who was going to be eaten up first.

"That's pretty music!" said Deverel, with a smile, and showing no fear; and as he spoke, he undid a clasp and opened the front of the box, thus discovering to view the caged tigress behind a row of strong iron bars.

It was an angry-looking creature, with gleaming teeth, and crouched a moment, catlike, then flew, snarling, forward, and fastened fiercely on one of the bars, as though it would have bitten it through.

Deverel looked at the tigress attentively. "That's one Jenkins had in Paris, isn't it? I swear to its head."

"You're right," replied Mr. Barlow, with a grin of approval. "That's she, sure enough."

"I can manage her, then, I think."

"Good luck to you if you can!"

Deverel took up an iron bar, which had been employed for one of the other cages, and walked round to the back of the tigress's cage. Barlow had his head turned away at the moment, but when he saw that Dick was opening the door he shouted out, in considerable excitement, for him to take care.

The spectators held their breath and were silent—transfixed, as it were—astounded.

Not more so than the tigress, however. She seemed to be paralyzed by the audacity of her visitor, for, for some time past, since the death of Jenkins, her late keeper, everybody had kept at a very respectful distance, and let her have pretty well her own way. She was, therefore, too much astonished at first to make any kind of resistance, or remonstrance. Very little while, however, did this state endure. She then collected herself for a spring.

Deverel's eyes, from the very moment he had entered the cage, were riveted upon hers, and presently, as she came rushing at him with a furious roar, he struck her on the side of the head with the bar, and hurled her over against the side of the cage with a thundering crash that made Mr. Barlow jump back a yard, thinking, not unreasonably, that the cage on that side had given way.

After a moment's hesitation, the tigress came rushing on him again, and this time he met her with a blow between the eyes, that brought her down upon her knees with a hollow groan of pain.

Then, fairly stunned and subdued, she lay in a corner of the cage, and allowed them to walk slowly out, and fasten the door behind them.

When things were thus satisfactorily brought to a conclusion, Deverel wiped the perspiration from his face, and drew a long breath.

"By Jove! a near squeak!" he said. "If you had not been here to help me, it would have been a case this time! May I shake hands with you?"

"Willingly! I am very pleased to have been of some help. She's given you an ugly nip, though, hasn't she? He's badly hurt, Barlow. Have you any brandy?"

He was very badly hurt, it turned out, upon close inspection. The blood was trickling down his sleeve, and he was sick and faint with the pain.

"I know a little bit about doctoring," said Everest; "let me bind it up for him. Cold water's best thing; let me have some, please, will you?"

They made the wounded man up a tolerably comfortable couch in a very short time with some straw and blankets, and Everest quickly and skilfully did what was necessary. Mr. Barlow looked on with considerable interest.

"Dashed if you're not good at everything!" said he. "I wish to goodness we could somehow do business together. You'd manage that beast in a week's time, I'll swear it, the same as if she was a baa-lamb!"

Everest smiled and shook his head.

"I'm in want of a situation just now, it's true," said he; "but I hardly think I'm up to this business. Besides, here's your man. He'll be all right in a week, if you see to him. I'll come and have a look at him myself in a day or two, if I can possibly manage it; but I'm thinking of going away soon."

"Not far away, I hope," said Mr. Barlow, "or for very long? I'd like to meet you again, sir; pon my word, I would! No offence. Now you know my name, would you tell me yours?"

"Cap—I mean Alfred Everest," replied the other. "I sold out of the Dragoons a few days ago. I am hard up, and am going abroad."

Deverel had been leaning back motionless for some seconds in the attitude in which Everest had placed him—one that afforded him the best rest obtainable under the circumstances. He half-struggled into an upright posture at the sound of the name, and looked eagerly towards the man who had been of such signal service to him.

"Did you say Everest?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Nothing now. I thought I had seen you before, that was all. I owe you a big debt of gratitude. I hope I'll be able to pay you some day."

"That's all right," replied Everest, lightly; "we'll do one another a good turn, if it's possible, I hope, when we meet next time. Good-bye for the present. Give me a light, Barlow, will you, old fellow. Have a cigar?"

Mr. Barlow preceded him to the door of the tent, and ushered him out with great politeness.

"You won't join us then, Captain?"

"No; I'm afraid that's impossible."

"I am very sorry for it, that's all I can say."

"So am I. Good-night."

"Good-night."

* * * * *

Everest walked forth, and stopped a dozen yards off to laugh to himself as he gazed up at the moon swimming tranquilly through broad blue space above.

"This has been a strange night, indeed," said he. "Pon my word, I've half a mind to go in for taming savage beasts! It's deuced exciting!"

Then he took the train, and went quietly home to bed.

THE TWELFTH FIGURE.

IN WHICH THE CLOCK STOPS.

- STEP I.—RAGE.
 "II.—RUIN.
 "III.—SICKNESS.
 "IV.—DEATH.

STEP I.

We left Mr. Pidgeon with the brokers in. We find him still in a bad way.

The broker had gone, it is true; but a man had been left in possession. He had taken his seat, and taken root in it, seemingly—a wooden-faced, phlegmatic man nothing seemed to move. Indeed, it was pretty certain he would not stir until the payment of that ten pounds and costs; and how could that be accomplished?

There was no way in the world of doing it, as it appeared to poor Pidgeon, unless Daddy Longlegs won the Shuffle and Out Handicap, to be run for in two days' time.

The first day passed slowly away, and poor Pidgeon nursed his aching head and cursed his cruel fate. The broker's man took short naps, and smoked his pipe, and read the papers during his brief wakeful intervals. There was scarcely a customer, and no visitors called.

"I have not a friend in the wide world, and nobody to care for me!" cried Pidgeon, bitterly; and he stropped a razor with such savage recklessness that he took the edge off all its length.

Whilst so occupied, however, a flutter of ribbons and a rustle of skirts were audible at the door; and Miss Em Pember, in festival attire, and rosier even than it was her wont to be, came bustling through the doorway into the dismal little shop.

She very seldom came to see him now, for it must be owned Mr. Rook was forever bringing her little parcels of scents and soaps, and other toilette requisites. What had brought her? Had she heard of his troubles? Pidgeon came forward, all in a wild flutter of excitement.

"Mr. Pidgeon!" she said.

"That voice!" he murmured, ecstatically. "My own!"

"I'm sure it's not!" retorted Miss Pember, with much glibness. "It's my own property yet awhile, at any rate!"

"Oh, Em!" gushed Pidgeon, ignoring the presence of the broker's man, who was all eyes and ears; "my heart's idol!"

"Why do you keep it idle, then?" said Miss Pember, still facetious. "I wish you'd try not to talk nonsense, sir, but attend to your customers. I want three-pennyworth of glycerine, if you please."

Pidgeon served her liberally, wrapped the bottle up carefully, lingered fondly over it to protract the interview as much as possible, and just squeezed Miss Pember's fingers the least bit in the world as he handed it to her.

"Oh, don't!" said she. "You'll break the bottle. Besides, I'm in a great hurry. Let me see, this is three-pence."

These three words, "This is three-pence," gave poor Pidgeon a kind of mental jerk, and he jumped as though a pin had pricked him. In the old times—seemingly years—really a month or two distant, she would not have dreamt of offering him money—vile coppers, even. It is true, he paid for all the refreshments he took at her house; but that was different, of course.

"Don't hurt my feelings more than you can help, Miss Pember," he said, in tones which were full of emotion. "And see here—here's a bottle of delicious hair oil. You'll wear this, too, for my sake, won't you?"

"I'm sure you're very kind, but I'm in a great hurry, so I'll say good-morning."

"Not in such a hurry as that, surely," pleaded Mr. Pidgeon. "Have you ever tried my old brown Windsor? Do take this cake with you."

"Oh, Mr. Pidgeon! I shall never be able to carry them all, and I really must be going."

"Half a moment. It's so seldom I see you, and it's so good of you to come. Accept this packet of hairpins I've been very unhappy lately, Miss Pember."

"It's really too kind of you, I'm sure! Have you, indeed?"

Mr. Pidgeon heaved a deep sigh.

"I am afraid I must be going," she murmured, playing abstractedly with the lid of a pretty powder box; "I've got an appointment."

"Oh, don't let me keep you," said Pidgeon, bitterly. "You're going over the way, perhaps, to the opposition shop. I hope you like Rook's rubbish!"

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Pidgeon, or how you dare speak so to me!" said Miss Pember, bridling up with just indignation, but at the same time keeping a pretty tight hold of the glycerine, hair oil, soap, and hair-pins.

"There, I beg your pardon, humbly," said the wretch—

ed barber. "I only say so because you know I love you."

"What nonsense! I don't believe you care half as much for me as you do for the stupid race-horses."

"Em Pimper, why do you think I want to make money if it is not to share it with you? Have a pair of side-combs."

"Are these for me? How pretty! but I'm afraid you'll only be cheated if you go on with this betting. There are some people who are always taking advantage of others. Besides, unless you are up to every move on the board!"

"Don't be so disparaging Miss Pimper. It's true I never rode a horse in my life, and ain't quite too sure I'd know which was a good 'un when I saw it; but you don't want to know anything about horses to bet. Look at Challice there. He knows everything—breeds horses—is in the stable from morning to night—and what comes of it?—he loses his money by the bucketful. His horses never win."

"Flash o' Lightning will win the Derby, though; everybody says so."

"Who's everybody? You see the knowing ones are dead against him. I'd lay every farthing I had in the world against him myself."

"Don't be rash, Mr. Pidgeon, and don't allow yourself to be led away. When you have lost everything, people will laugh at you, that's all. And now I must go. Good-morning!"

And she moved towards the door with her lap full of Pidgeon's presents, but here the broker's man put in his word.

"I say!" said the broker's man; "who's a going to pay for them things? I can't allow the stock to be carted away in wholesale, in that fashion!"

Miss Pimper opened her eyes to their widest, and Mr. Pidgeon blushed crimson.

"Oh!" said she, laying the things down on the counter; "I didn't know, I'm sure. Shall I?"

"No, certainly not!" cried the unhappy Pidgeon in an agony of shame. "I—I—will pay for them myself! It's all right! Good morning!" And instead of pressing her to stay this time, he pushed her towards the door.

But the man did not seem to think things were going on very satisfactorily, and he got in front, and blocked the passage. "It's only my duty I'm doing," said he. "Mr. Pidgeon ought to know they ain't his goods he's giving away. They're Mr. Rook's."

"Mr. Rook's!" said Miss Pimper. "Oh Mr. Pidgeon! how could you? Is this true?"

"Quite true," replied Pidgeon, sullenly, and looking very livid. "Perhaps you'd better not take them. Now I come to think of it, I haven't money enough in my pocket to pay. It did not occur to me when I was making you a few trifling presents. You'll despise me after this, I have no doubt, and very properly. I suppose I ought to be forsaken, and oughtn't to mind it. Good morning!"

"Good morning!" said Miss Pimper, and went away minus the little trifles, and without saying another word. Then Mr. Pidgeon sat down, and took his head in his hands, and tugged violently at the hair on either side of it.

"I'm very sorry, indeed, governor," said the broker's man. "It was rather awkward before the young lady, too, I must admit, but I was forced to it, you know. It was only my duty."

"Pray don't apologize," said Pidgeon, bitterly. "I'm getting used to shame and humiliation. I dare say I shall rather like it than otherwise, in due time."

"Well, sir, if Daddy Longlegs pulls off the Shuffle and Cut to-day, you'll be all right, I take it, and able to pay Rook out."

"Ah!" said Pidgeon; "sha'n't I, and won't I?"

STEP II.

BUT at that very moment, Mr. Pidgeon's sporting friend, Mr. Chouser, appeared upon the threshold, with evil tidings.

"Pidgeon, old fellow," said he, "here's a pretty kettle of fish! I'm so sorry for you!"

"What's the matter?" gasped Pidgeon. "A little more of it?"

"I've just come from the station, and I've heard that Daddy Longlegs!"

"Has won, eh? Hooray! I don't care now!"

"Don't make an error. He's done nothing of the kind. He's scratched!"

"Scratched! Who's been scratching him? Is it a bad place?"

"A jolly bad place. He won't be placed at all. Don't you understand? His name's struck out of the race!"

"His name's out! Then I?"

"Yes, exactly. You've done it!"

"I've lost the ten pounds I told Tom Potts to put on him?"

"To be sure! But look here! There's just time now for you to back Grasshopper, and hedge your money. Grasshopper's a certainty; and you've laid me 40 to 1 against him. What do you say, now? Give me your pound. I can put it on for you, there, over the way."

"I haven't a farthing," said Pidgeon, savagely; "and I've done with races forever!"

"After settling-day, you mean, I suppose?" said the other, with a slight sneer. "However, do as you like, my good sir; I want to do you a kindness, that's all. See you again, when Grasshopper has won."

Mr. Pidgeon did not feel equal to replying. He sat down again, and once more took his head in his hands. Presently, looking up, he found the broker's man staring at him with an absent look in his eyes, and with a pencil and a pocket-book in his hands.

"Hallo!" said Pidgeon; "you're not putting me down in the inventory, are you? What are you thinking of?"

"I was calculating."

"Calculating what?"

"How much I'd lost by Daddy Longlegs, that's all."

"Oh, you've lost by Daddy Longlegs, too, have you? Well, that's some sort of comfort. I don't mean to be spiteful to you, but you don't know how consoling it is to know that some one else has dropped his money. How my poor head does ache! I shouldn't at all wonder presently if I went clean crazy."

Then came a rush of milliner's girls from the new milliner's establishment which had been opened down the High Street.

"What can I do for you, young ladies?" asked Mr. Pidgeon.

"Have you this week's number of 'Matilda Mildew'?" asked the foremost young lady.

"No," replied Pidgeon, bitterly. "She hasn't been mildewed this week. Is that all you require?"

"Yes, thank you," said the young lady.

"Well," said Pidgeon, "bring a few more of your kind, will you, when next you come here to spend a penny? I shall take it as a favor."

It seemed to Pidgeon that his cup of bitterness was well-nigh full to overflowing. It would not bear much more, that was certain. Yet there was a little more in store for him, nevertheless.

He fell back in his old attitude, pondering gloomily on his future prospects.

"If I hadn't been such a fool as to have lost all my money on that swindling horse, this would never have happened," he said, very sagely; "and I could have defied Rook, and stuck to my shop in spite of him!"

"Mr. Pidgeon!" said Rook's voice in his ear.

"How dare you come here?" cried the other, starting up.

"There, there!" said Rook; "don't let's quarrel. You may step outside, Mr. Stickler," he said to the broker's man. "You've not paid out my man yet, I see, Mr. Pidgeon."

"No, not yet. I shall pay you all out presently, perhaps."

"We really ought not to quarrel, you and me, Mr. Pidgeon," the other continued, persuasively. "We ought to be friends."

"Oh! ought we?"

"Yes; the fact is, I've had my eye on you a long while."

"Have you?"

"Yes; and I've thought it such a pity that you should, as it were, be throwing away your talents where there was no market for them."

"Like me to go and throw 'em away round the corner, perhaps, in some other parish?"

"I've known you haven't been getting on well, and I've not been surprised."

"No?"

"So now let us talk the matter over, and see if we can't come to some amicable arrangement. There's no good in our cutting one another's throats, is there?"

"Well, no," said Pidgeon; but he thought to himself he would very much have liked to make a one-sided operation of the throat-cutting.

"Now," continued Rook, "there's that little matter of rent, for instance. I don't want to press you, Lord!" said he, slapping Pidgeon on the back, "I'm not at all that sort of man when you know me, old fellow! Ha! ha!"

"Ha! ha!" echoed Pidgeon; "what a jolly old bird you must be when one finds you out!"

"Well," said Rook, "I am, you know."

"And still you keep it so quiet!"

"Yes. Well, as I was saying about this rent, I don't want to press you."

"No?"

"No; I've heard you've had a heavy loss on the turf, and so I don't mind looking over the debt altogether."

Pidgeon gasped again; then clutched the other by the hand. "This is too generous of you!"

"Not at all. There's only one little condition."

"Oh! there is one?"

"Yes, just one—about Miss Pimper. As you very truly remarked a little while ago, she has a preference for you."

"Oh!"

"Yes; and so, as I want to marry her, and, indeed, am determined I will do so, the best way is for you to write her a letter and say you give her up."

"Is that really the best way?"

"Yes, I fancy so. It ought to be rather an off-hand kind of letter, you know—one that will hurt her feelings a little, and wound her pride!"

"Ah!"

"She will give you up, then, and I shall be all right."

"Well, you are a jolly old bird, and no mistake!" cried Pidgeon. "I should never have believed you was half so jolly! And those are the terms on which you forgive me my rent?"

"Yes, these are the terms."

"Rook, old boy, you're too good. It's letting me off too easy. You're too considerate for my feelings. Rook. But look here; let's say a word in your ear. Things have gone rather crooked with me lately. I'm down in the mud, and Miss Fortune's got her foot on me, and she's rather heavy in the heel. But you've made a mistake, Rook, old boy, for all that. You may sell me up and empty me out—you may shove me out of house and home; but you won't get me to strop your razor, Mr. Rook! I adore Miss Pimper; but I don't intend to trouble anybody much more in this world. I hope soon to be dust and ashes!"

And here the poor fellow's feelings overcame him, and he let fall his head upon the counter with a thump, and burst into tears!

A hand was laid upon his shoulder, at the first touch of which he flew up into a fighting attitude; then as suddenly subsided, finding that it was not Mr. Rook who had ventured upon this liberty, but Em Pimper herself.

"Em!" he cried.

"Yes, it's me," said Miss Pimper. "I have heard all—at least, a good deal of what you have been saying. I was standing there behind you at the door, but you were so busy talking you did not notice me. As to that man," she said, turning with a look full of the most withering contempt upon the opposition barber, "he is beneath my contempt!"

"Or anybody's," said Pidgeon.

"He has deceived me cruelly," continued Em. "He has told me a lot of wicked falsehoods, whilst he has been pretending to talk only in your interests. He said that if I would marry him he would do you a good turn."

"He meant a good turn-out!"

"That's just exactly what I did mean," cried Rook, savagely. "You'll find you can't trifle with me. You may bill and coo now, but you'll be sold up at the very lowest market value, depend on that."

"Em," said Pidgeon, in a trembling voice, "the wretch is right. We are in his power. Reflect, then, before you sacrifice yourself! Don't think of me; if I will be only momentary if I do it with determination."

Miss Pimper clung to him. The scene was assuming high melodramatic proportions.

"Oh, Mr. Pidgeon!" she said, "do you think when you were no more I could wed another? Does not the proverb say, what isn't enough for one is plenty for two? If we are to come to the grave, let us have one between us. I will not desert you!"

Rook stamped his feet and ground his teeth. "I'll have my rent; do you understand that? I'll have my rent without any more foolery!"

"That can be managed, I think," said Miss Pimper, with quiet determination, and produced a couple of crumpled bank-notes from a little black leather bag she was carrying on her arm.

But Pidgeon stayed her hand. "I cannot allow that. I will be sold up. It is my fault for being such a fool as to back that wretched horse!"

He plunged his hand into his pocket in search of his pocket handkerchief, as he said this, and withdrawing it again, jerked a paper on to the floor without noticing it. Miss Pimper stooped and picked it up.

"Ugh!" said Pidgeon, with infinite disgust. "It's Pott's letter. I never read it," and he made as though he were going to fling it into the fire.

"Do read it first," said Em.

"What's the good?"

"Let me, then."

She opened it, and saw a post-office order.

"Oh, look here!" she cried. "Here's ten pounds; and what's this?" Then she read aloud, "'I hear there's something wrong with Daddy, and so I haven't touched him. I send you back the ten, as there's nothing I fancy myself among the lot.'"

Pidgeon almost screamed.

"Good heavens! I'm not ruined then, after all! Mr. Rook, here's your dirty rent?"

"There's some dirty costs, too," said Rook.

"You shall have them, too," said Miss Pimper, producing some money.

"Well," said Rook, "don't be exalted, either of you. I think, on the whole, I prefer the money to the lady; not that I want to say anything uncivil."

"You'd better not, my friend," rejoined Pidgeon; "and, if you'll take a fool's advice, you'll go before you're kicked."

Mr. Rook took the advice, and retired. In the doorway he was jostled by Mr. Chowser, Pidgeon's sporting friend.

"Em," said Pidgeon, without noticing him, "I've been a fool, but I give you my word I'll never bet again. I have been a fool, haven't I?"

"I don't know that, Pidgeon, my friend," cried Chowser, breaking in. "I'm not that way of thinking. Hooray, old boy? you acted rather unkind to me the last time we met, but no matter. I've news for you—glorious news! It was a false alarm about Daddy Longlegs being scratched. He's not scratched. He's won, and as you put ten pounds on him, you've quietly pocketed two hundred! I congratulate you, old boy!"

Pidgeon fell backwards into the shaving-chair and gasped.

STEP III.

AFTER the world came to an end at East Haggelford, the world seemed to go on anyhow; and, on the showing of the oldest inhabitant, there was no keeping pace with it.

"Folks seem to have gone clean crazy," the oldest inhabitant remarked, upon the occasion of meeting the miller's female servant in a hat and feather. "This beats everything I ever came across in all my born days!"

But there were more astonishing things going on than even the hat and feather. The grand doings at the Hall, for instance, caused general surprise and some consternation. There seemed to be carried on there one long continuous revel, and the house was full of visitors and servants—quite a little village population by itself. The money must have flowed like water.

Looking on at all this wild extravagance, those among the East Haggelfordians who were best informed upon their neighbors' affairs shook their heads, and said they hoped it would last. Whether or not their wishes were very sincere it is difficult to say, for there is a kind of consolation to some people to see affairs going wrong with other people, when things have not gone particularly well with themselves.

"He has made a good thing by his race-horses during the past season," some one said; "that ought to have helped him along."

"Bah! he spends more money on them than he makes by them. There are very few men who breed race-horses, and make anything by it."

"If he's wise, when he wins the Derby he'll throw racing up."

"He won't do that if he does win, you may be sure."

On the contrary, he'll go on at it, hotter than ever. Besides, he may not win."

"It'll be a case with him, then, I reckon, if half what is said about the money he has put on comes true."

The speakers were in the company of a crisp, clean-shaven little gentleman, who might have said a good deal upon good authority had he chosen to do so; but maintained a cautious silence, and pretended to be deeply absorbed in the leading articles of the newspaper he held in front of him. He was, in fact, the Chalice's legal adviser.

Next day business called him to the Hall, and he felt it his duty to give a few words of friendly advice and counsel—giving them very gently, indeed, by the way, for he was a timid little man, and always felt bashful and ill at ease in the presence of the fair, handsome woman who retained his legal services—a woman, who, by the way, at a far distance, he had ventured to be in love with any time for the last twenty years, and had never said a word upon the subject to a living soul.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed the rich Mrs. Challice; "how can you come here, frightening me out of my life? Now, really, is there any cause for uneasiness?"

"No, no! certainly not," the small gentleman stammered. "No immediate cause; but if I may venture to say so—you'll excuse me, I am sure, for you know how I have your interests at heart—if I may venture to say so, I would suggest that Mr. Charles be asked—be recommended to be a little more careful—less venturesome. One never knows what may happen. Race-horses are such unreliable property. You'll excuse me, I'm sure."

"I have heard that Charles is betting heavily, but not rashly, I hope. I'll speak to him. Besides, I think when he is married he will give up the turf to a great extent; and as to our household expenses, I don't quite see how I can reduce them just at present. When Charles is married, perhaps, if they go abroad. However, with her income added to his—I am not quite sure what my brother-in-law left his wife—I don't think I ever heard—but in the extraordinary way she has lived—so mean, almost miserly—she must really have accumulated a large sum. Is not that the case?"

The lawyer rubbed his chin with his hand, and was silent.

"Why don't you speak? Don't you know?"

"I'm not quite sure."

"Will you try and find out, and let me know?"

"I will."

"Martha! Martha! tell him it is all right. I know where I can get the money quite easily. How foolish of me to have forgotten that! Haven't I estates in Shropshire? And then there's Harriet's dowry; but we must not touch that—must we, Martha?"

She had no estates in Shropshire or anywhere else, poor soul! Her mind was wandering.

"Hush—hush, dear!—lie down and go to sleep. The man has gone away. He will never come again to bother you," said old Martha; and she tenderly smoothed the sick lady's pillow as she spoke.

STEP IV.

Now and then she appeared to recover something of her old energy, and would turn to a confused mass of illegible figures scribbled over scraps of paper, and in a ragged, dog-eared account-book, which she kept always by her side upon a table, on which were also some physic bottles, a hand-glass, a rouge-pot, and a Bible.

With trembling fingers then she would turn over and over these scraps, and, pencil in hand, dot up and total staggering rows of figures, until, overcome with fatigue, and her sight growing dim, she sank back with a weary sigh.

"I can't make out what's paid and what is owing," she said, more than once. "It's that which troubles me. If I could only make 't out I would not care."

Then, as before, the faithful old servant would softly smooth her pillow, and in a gentle voice murmur some words of comfort, to which the other would reply perhaps with a slight pressure of the hand.

"We understand each other, don't we?" the lady asked one day.

"We ought to do, dear, after so long."

"After so long. Yes, such a long—long while, is it not, when you come to look back?"

One day, when Martha—who slept in her mistress's room, and was, therefore, the first to see her in the morning—came to the bedside, she thought a great change for the better had occurred. It was one of those changes dying people have sometimes, in which the expiring embers, as it were, are puffed up into a sudden blaze, and then as suddenly go out.

"I feel as though I could do a bit of work this morning," she said; "draw my table a little nearer, Martha, and give me my papers."

"Won't you tire yourself out?" Martha asked.

"There's plenty of time, too, is not there?"

"No, no; there is no time to waste—there is never time to waste in this world! Besides, I have let things go into arrears. There are some matters I shall forget altogether if I don't put them down myself while I think of it."

Martha argued the question no longer, but handed her mistress the articles she desired. For some two hours she fidgeted with the books and papers, propped up by pillows, to enable her to do so more comfortably. Then Martha, coming to her, found another change had taken place. She lay in a half-dreamy state, and, arousing herself with difficulty, stared vacantly at the woman.

The page of the book upon which she had been last occupied was covered with an indescribable confusion of half-formed figures, hieroglyphics, and gibberish, which had something horribly grotesque about it. Martha shut the book up hastily and laid it on one side.

"Try and take a little nap now. I'm going to look after the dinner," she said; "you must not worry about these sums any more."

"No," the old lady said; "I have done enough. Now all is settled."

Martha went away; but an hour later, the bed-room bell rang, and she hurried up stairs. Her mistress was sitting up in her bed, her eyes staring wildly, her limbs trembling.

She caught at Martha's hand eagerly.

"Oh, Martha, Martha! All our lives we have been mad! All our troubles have been for nothing! It has been a mistake!"

"Yes, dear—yes! Lie down. Do not excite yourself."

"How you talk! But you do not know. When you hear all, you will see what I said was true. Did you meet him on the stairs?"

"Meet whom? Benson's man? No. I told you he had gone for good—was not coming back again at all."

"I am almost sorry for that now."

"Why? What do you mean?"

"Because he has come back, you know."

"Whom do you mean?"

"Why, you know. He passed out of the door a moment before you came in. He entered by the window, and passed out by the door."

"Oh, my poor dear, lie down—lie down! Try to compose yourself. You are talking so strangely!"

"Ah, that's true! It must seem odd to you, if you have not seen him; but he is here, I tell you! Do you think I cannot believe my own eyes and ears? My son is here. He was not drowned. He has returned. Five minutes ago he sat there by the bedside on that chair. He held my hand in his and said, 'Mother, I am so sorry you are ill. I have been away a long while; but I could not help it. I was ashamed to return, because I could not pay the money. I did not know my stopping away so long would make you suffer so much; but it will be all right now. I never forged that bill. It is not in my handwriting. You will see all will come right.'"

The old servant listened to this wild story with a strange, indescribable fear upon her. Of course no one had been in the room, least of all the dead son who had been the cause of those weary years of misery the sick lady had passed through; but what could have caused her to have this fancy all at once?

Two entirely new theories had been started by her simultaneously.

The forged bill had not been forged by the son.

The son was still alive.

Whilst Martha was yet pondering over this, her mistress sank wearily back upon the pillow, and seemed to doze off to sleep.

Harriet came to the door, and gently turned the handle.

"She is very excited to-day, miss," said Martha. "We must keep her quite quiet. If you would take a walk—you look so pale and ill—we may have to sit up with her all night—a walk will do you good. You will feel stronger then."

The day passed slowly, and twilight began to gather once again in the corners of the room.

"Martha!" the old woman called to her.

"Yes, dear!"

"That is only the clock ticking on the stairs, is it?"

"That is all. Does it annoy you? Shall I stop it?"

"No, no! not now I know it is only that! Do you know, I was afraid of it once? How silly; but we are like that! I was afraid about that bill, too. But, then, how could we know? It is so extraordinary he should be alive when we thought him to be dead— isn't it?"

Her mind was still running on this mad fancy.

A few minutes later she spoke again.

"Is that the clock still ticking?"

"Yes."

"Let it go on as long as I do," she said, and closed her eyes again.

The darkness seemed to thicken as she ceased speaking.

Without, the sun was setting redly behind the trees. Harriet, at the bottom of the garden, stood gazing at it sadly, and watching its crimson turn to purple, then to brown, then to a dull, dead slate color. At last nothing was left of the setting sun. It might never have been.

She turned with a heavy sigh towards the house, standing cold and dark against the leaden sky. The dead leaves crept shuddering past, and huddled together beneath the bare trunks of the trees. She opened the back door cautiously, she hardly knew why, and stepped noiselessly across the threshold, then paused to listen. Within was perfect silence, save for the loud, clear, regular ticking of the clock. She heard this distinctly, and counted as she did so. Then, of a sudden, there was a dead silence. The clock had stopped!

Almost at the same moment she heard a long, low, wailing cry in the room above. Her mother was dead! There on the bed it lay, where she had been! Martha, on her knees by the bed, groveled in an agony of grief and despair. "Oh, my mistress, my poor, dear darling! You were no mistress to me—you were my friend, the only friend I had! Oh, you are not dead! You shall not die! What have I left?"

Harriet crept to her side, and, sinking down on her knees beside her, timidly caught at her hand, sobbing bitterly.

FIGURE THE THIRTEENTH.

IN WHICH A GIRSY GIRL MAKES A MISTAKE.

STEP I.—THE MAN WHO HESITATED AND WAS LOST.

"II.—THE LADY WHO ASKED QUESTIONS.

"III.—THE DEAD MAN'S MONEY.

"IV.—"THE BIGGEST SCOUNDREL UNHUNG."

STEP I.

EVEREST had quite made up his mind that he would not stop another week in town. If some arrangement

could not be entered into with Sir Roly's friend, the Colonel, he would go away by himself anywhere. He had no choice, as long as it was a good way off.

He was quite determined, though, about one thing. As I have already said, he would not stop another week in town. A fortnight passed, and he was still indolently strolling along Pall Mall, and, as usual, smoking a cigar. It was only an eightpenny one, however. You see, he was beginning to be economical. He was obliged to be so.

Sir Roly's friend, Colonel Cordery, had returned to town and left again hurriedly. Sir Roly missed him by a moment. Everest thought he himself would write, and he gave Sir Roly the letter, with the address blank; Sir Roly saying that was the best and quickest plan, as he would ascertain where the Colonel was, and forward it direct.

To this letter Everest received no reply, and felt rather annoyed at what he thought to be extreme rudeness on the Colonel's part. He, therefore, determined to let the matter go, and look out for something else.

Blair, too, had promised to help him, as we have seen. In their next interview he frankly owned that he could do nothing with the Colonel.

"Wagstaffe can do it, if anyone can, if we are to believe him," said he. "He's as good a hearted fellow as ever lived, but perhaps a trifle unreliable. Talks loosely—does not keep close enough to the meaning of words—promises too hastily. I can't forgive that to him. I've told him so over and over again. But I think he's all right this time, and he'll do it for you if it is in his power. One thing I can promise. If he does not manage this, I will manage something as good, or better. There is no hurry for a few hours, is there?"

"No; it's not quite a question of hours yet."

This conversation took place over the dessert at Blair's dinner-table, where they were sitting alone, Miss Blair having left them to go into the drawing-room. Sir Roly was not Blair's guest upon this occasion, nor had Everest encountered him again at Blair's house since the first occasion. When they had met, it had been Everest who had sought out the baronet; and, indeed, he had taken some trouble to do so, for Sir Roly was eminently un-get-at-able.

Everest had now been to Blair's to dinner on four or five occasions within a couple of weeks, and had made several morning calls, which had been of more than ordinary length. He had also been one of a party to Richmond; and, on the fourteenth day of the acquaintance, he found himself standing on the platform at the Charing Cross Station bidding the young lady good-bye, for she was going to Paris for a month. Her father accompanied her, but would return.

"I am very sorry I am not one of the party," he said.

She laid her hand upon his arm, and looked into his eyes from her seat in the carriage.

"I am very sorry, too," she answered; "but why don't you come?"

"I—I don't know. I'm afraid I can't," he stammered.

"Have you any important engagements?"

"No; none. Nothing of the kind."

"You are too fond of town to leave it?"

"I hate London. There's nothing I should like better than to go away and never see it again."

"Then why do you not come? Do!"

The pressure of the delicately-gloved hand was more decided now, and there was something pleading in the dark gray eyes fixed on him.

Blair had been away a minute or two seeing after the luggage. He returned at this juncture. "He will come!" Blair said, decisively. "Of course. I have taken his ticket!"

"Taken my ticket?" stammered Everest, and with a sudden flush that had some anger in it. "What made you do that?"

"Because I thought it was the only way to persuade you. I know I could not have done it any other way. There! see, it's a return. You can get back to-morrow if you like, only come over with us! You can telegraph when you get to Dover to say you will be away for a few hours; it need not be longer than that, if you don't like, you know!"

Throughout his life, indecision had been one of Everest's worse failings. He was for a moment undecided, and then he took his seat in the carriage, and the train started and bore the three travelers swiftly away.

The lady reader of this history will say, "He was in love with Blair's daughter." The lady reader will be wrong. He was not a bit in love with her.

Everest and his companions went to the Hotel Bristol, where rooms had been engaged. After dinner, Blair and he took a walk, and sat and smoked their cigars at a little marble table outside a cafe; for the night, although it was late in the autumn, was as warm as a summer's evening, and only a soft zephyr rustled the gold-tinted leaves upon the trees in front of them.

It was a strange sight, and rather a sad one.

Blair looked at it unmoved, and leaning back, puffed rings of smoke into the air that floated upwards, then lengthened, and broke, and burst their shape, mingling with the darkness overhead. Everest's cigar lay idly between his lips; it had gone out, and he had forgotten it. Suddenly Blair's voice aroused him from a reverie into which he had fallen.

"Don't you think it would be a mistake on your part to hide yourself in savage countries, killing buffaloes?"

"No; why?"

"Why kill buffaloes? I understand it's overdone as it is. If the wholesale slaughter of buffaloes goes on much longer as it has been going on, there will be none of the poor brutes left."

Everest laughed.

"I'm not exactly pledged to kill buffaloes. Men will do, if there's nothing more exciting! I wish somebody would open up a new gold-diggings somewhere. I should like to go gold-digging!"

"I wonder it has never occurred to you that there is

gold to be dug up over there in England much easier."

"I dare say some people could make a great deal more money than ever any one man dug up by sitting quietly at a desk with a pen in his hand. But I know I couldn't."

"I think you would not have to work very much harder than that to make a good thumping sum."

"What trade can I take up? Write a book?"

"Certainly not!"

"Make a book?"

"You might do worse than that; but you don't care for betting. I do."

"No; I don't think that I should do very much with betting. What else is there? I should prefer something exciting—not quite so exciting, perhaps, as the berth I was offered at the wild beast show I told you of. Something stirring, though, with some risks in it."

"I think I can, perhaps, help you to something of that kind; but you know my little weakness; I won't pledge myself exactly just yet. I will promise nothing. You must be patient. In a day or two I shall know. Stop here for that time with us. It's amusing, isn't it? Always something fresh here—something to see. That's a good-looking gipsy girl, isn't she? What a brute the boy is!—an idiot, I think. They're going to sing."

The gipsies alluded to had taken up a position almost opposite to the table where Blair and Everest were sitting, and, as Blair spoke, the girl began, in a low, clear voice, to sing, or rather to chaunt, a strange, wild melody, which presently the boy took part in, accompanying the words with uncouth gestures and distortions of countenance which were by turns grotesque and horrible.

The exhibition appeared to suit the taste of the bystanders, and a shower of sous fell into the girl's tambourine when, at the end of the song, she went the round of the crowd.

She worked her way along by the many tables standing out upon the pavement under the cafe awning, and came in due course to that where Everest and his new friend sat, and she held out the tambourine.

But at the sight of Everest's face she drew it back again suddenly, and her cheeks flushed and her eyes sparkled.

Then she muttered some dozen or so of words in great anger, but they were in a language with which neither of the listeners were familiar.

"What does she say?" asked Blair.

"I don't know. It's gipsy talk. That's Romany, you know."

"Yes, Romany," the girl answered quickly, this time speaking broken English. "We'll not take your money. We don't want it. It would bring us ill luck, as you did yourself when last we met."

Everest looked towards his new friend in unfeigned astonishment.

"What does she mean?" he said. "Is she talking to you? I never saw her before."

"You hear what the gentleman says," said Blair. "You're laboring under a delusion, my dear girl. The gentleman has not the honor of your acquaintance."

The girl fixed her eyes steadily upon Everest's face, then tossed her head, with a short, harsh laugh.

"I know him very well. I never forget any one I have once well looked at. I'll tell you when I saw you the last time. You were dressed then like a fine gentleman, as you are now, and you met Squire Challice and the young lady he's going to be married to—they were driving—at the gates leading into the new Hall park. Do you remember?"

Everest started, and colored slightly.

"I remember very well meeting Mr. Challice and the lady as you say, but I did not see you. After all, what of it, though?"

"I'll tell you where I saw you, then, the last time but one."

"Do so, by all means. Was I dressed like a gentleman then?"

"No. You were in rags and tatters. Your clothes were soaked with the water of the mill stream they had dipped you in. You came up to our camp-fire one night, and begged our people to let you dry yourself by it. You were shivering with cold and half starved. I found you a place by the fire, and gave you something to eat. Do you remember that?"

"No, upon my life, I don't!" cried Everest, evidently much astonished. "Go on."

Blair listened silently.

"Your coming there brought us all ill luck, as Ishmael said it would. It caused the police to be down on us, and they found two or three bits of rubbish our people had gathered off the hedges by the way. Next day the camp had to be broken up, and we were scattered right and left. My brother and I were strangers in that country. We wanted to come south—get over here, to work our way back to Spain, which is our home. We had no money to get on with, and tried to make some by our singing; but they are all savages in the country you belong to. They hissed us and threw stones at us. Then the police came, and we were taken before the Squire, and he called us rogues and vagabonds, and sent us to jail."

"I am sorry you have been so unfortunate," said Everest; "and I hope you are doing better now. They like you here, it seems. Let me give you something to help you on your way."

"Not a farthing. You pretend still you do not know me."

"Certainly I do not."

"And your name is not Dick Deverel?"

"Dick Deverel! No."

The girl took a long breath, and stood motionless before them. Then, hastily approaching her brother, she plucked at his sleeve, and pointed to Everest. The idiot boy raised his hand to shade his eyes, and gave a start, then talked quickly. Then very slowly they went away, the boy shaking his head as though unconvinced by what his sister was saying.

Everest watched them with no little interest, for, as

may be well imagined, this curious incident was surprising enough even to startle him.

After a moment, however, he decided that it was a thing to laugh at, not to trouble his head about seeking for an explanation of its meaning; and he turned towards the spot where Blair had been sitting a minute or two ago, which was a little behind his own chair; but his friend had gone.

He look after him to the right and to the left; but Blair was nowhere visible.

"What has become of him, I wonder?" he said to himself. "He has not gone after the gipsies, I suppose. Couldn't have done that. Why should he? It's no business of his, and he has no earthly reason, that I know of, to interest himself so much in my affairs."

Whilst he was still pondering thus, Blair returned.

"I was afraid you would think I was lost," he said.

"You did not go after those gipsies, did you?"

"Me? No. I saw a man I knew, and went to speak to him. Have they been back?"

"No."

"It was rather an odd thing, was it not? Cases of mistaken identity turn out rather awkwardly sometimes."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Oh, nothing. This gentleman in the rags and tatters was down at Haggelord the time you were there, it seems."

"It seems so."

"Did you remember what she said his name was?"

"No; I'm not very good at remembering names. Besides a pack of rubbish! What's the good our talking about it any more?"

"No good at all, except for talks sake. I have it, though. It was Deverel!—Dick Deverel! A striking kind of name! Have you ever heard of it before, yourself?"

Something suddenly dawned upon Everest's mind.

"By Jove, yes!—I heard it once, or something very like it, but I forget where."

"Don't you remember telling me about your struggle with the tiger in the wild beast show?"

"To be sure! It was a name like that the man who was bitten gave me. Did I tell you again?"

"No; you said his name was Dick Darrel!"

"It was something of that kind—I can't swear to it; but I fancy now it was most likely Deverel. I'm nearly sure it was. How came you to remember so well?"

"I can't tell you; only, I generally bear these things in mind. Something else struck me as rather singular at the time; and when that girl mentioned the name, it brought it back to my recollection."

"I know nothing particular about the affair, except that the brute of a tiger took a deal of strangling before he would leave go."

"Don't you remember something else, though—that the showman noticed a striking likeness between Deverel and yourself?"

"To be sure, he did, now you mention it; but I had forgotten."

"Don't you see, then, that the Deverel the girl spoke of must have been the one you met?"

"If that were the case, then the man who was soaked through by being chucked into the mill-stream was very probably a poor fellow Challice and I rescued from the mob. He was a 'welcher,' pickpocket, or something, who had been robbing the folks on the race-course. Rather nice to be mistaken for a vagabond of that kind, isn't it?"

"What was the showman's name—do you recollect?"

"Not in the least! But, good gracious me! let's change the subject."

"Shall we go back to the hotel?"

"I think so; I'm rather tired."

Arriving at the hotel, Everest bade his friend good night, and went to his room, taking up the *Times* with him to read, as was his habit, in bed.

Having undressed himself, and lain down, he took the paper up, folded as it was, and glanced down the list of births, marriages, and deaths. The first name in the latter was Challice, and the paragraph recorded the death of Harriet's mother.

"I ought to write," he said. "It is only commonly polite to do so."

Then he turned the paper over to another part, and looked at it very hard for half an hour, thinking he was reading.

"I'll go back to town to-morrow," he said to himself, "by the mid-day train."

* * * * *

When Everest rang the bell next morning for his bath, the waiter brought with it a note, which he said Mr. Blair had left for him over night.

"Left for me?" repeated Everest, in astonishment.

"Where is he?"

"He went away by the night train."

"Where to?"

"I don't know, sir. Perhaps he says in the letter."

"To be sure," said Everest, tearing it open—"and Miss Blair?"

"She is in her room."

"Oh!" said Everest; and he felt, if possible, rather more eager than before to learn further particulars.

The note, however was rather brief:

"MY DEAR EVEREST: We have known one another but a very short time, yet I trust I can call you my friend. It is only of a real friend I would ask the favor I am compelled to ask now. I have just received news of an alarming accident in my stable. I must start this very minute. You are asleep. I have not time to explain more. Will you pay the hotel bill with enclosed, and take my daughter on to Marseilles? I will meet you there, at the Hotel du Louvre; that is the newest and best. May I rely on you to do me this great favor?"

"Yours sincerely,

"J. BLAIR."

Everest gave a long whistle.

"Confounded like impertinence it seems to me!"

said he. "Asking me to drag his daughter over five hundred miles by the railway! What are these?"

He looked over the notes enclosed in the envelope as he spoke.

"A hundred pounds! He does not spoil his ship for a half-pennyworth of tar, anyhow. An alarming accident! What is it, I wonder? Well, I don't see my way out of the thing very clearly. I must take care of Miss Blair, I suppose, and do what I am told."

STEP II.

EVEREST found that Miss Blair had received an even shorter note from her father than that addressed to him. In one line he said, "Obliged to go to England. Coming back, Everest will explain."

Everest, therefore, explained as well as he could. Fortunately, Miss Blair, being a very self-restrained, matter-of-fact young lady, the shock was not a very hard one, and the situation less awkward than at first he expected it would turn out.

She and her maid left Paris that afternoon, under Everest's care, and Miss Blair and Everest traveled first-class, the maid second.

There are a good many men like Everest. Miss Blair herself was not nearly so well satisfied by the existing state of affairs.

Blair arrived in the middle of the day, and coming on foot to the hotel, quietly inquired if his daughter was within.

"No; the English mademoiselle had gone out for a walk with the English monsieur."

Blair ascertained the direction they had taken, and followed, looking cautiously about as he did so, that they might not come upon him unawares.

He had not proceeded very far down a long promenade, lined on either side by trees, when he saw them coming towards him, and he stepped behind a tree to watch them. She was talking earnestly. He was listening attentively, and looking down into her face. They did not pass near enough for Blair to catch any of the words she uttered.

When he reached the hotel, he asked for Miss Blair, and was shown up to her room.

"Well, father, you have come at last!" was her greeting, with a weary sigh, as she seated herself. There was no accompanying embrace, and he did not seem to look for it. He quietly seated himself also, and did not smile. He saw at once there was something wrong, and that things were not going on satisfactorily.

"I have had a good deal to do," he said. "Could not get here sooner. That ought not to have been any drawback. Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Oh, that's it? Nothing come of it?"

"Nothing. It is waste of time. We had better go back again."

"That is owing to an ignominious defeat. You've had plenty of time, I'm sure, to twist a dozen such round your finger. Well, I suppose we must have patience."

"We must give the thing up, I say. I will have no more to do with it."

"You're not a fool, are you?"

"No, I am not."

"Have you taken a dislike to the man?"

"On the contrary."

"Bah! What is it, then? Oh, I see; another woman in the case!"

"Yes."

"You've found out all about her, of course. Who is she? What's her name?"

"Her name is Challice. She is engaged to be married to Charles Challice, of Haggelord."

Blair gave a long, low whistle; then stood, with his hands plunged into his pockets, perfectly still and motionless. After a pause, he chuckled.

"That will do quite as well," he said. "They are to be married in a month, I heard. Charles Challice, eh? This may turn out very lucky."

He moved towards the door, but she called him back.

"What is it you want with this man?" she asked.

"My dear, that is my affair," he answered, quietly.

"One thing I should have liked with him was for him to have been your husband. You won't find a richer one very easily."

"He says he has not got a penny."

"He may say what he likes. He does not know. However, I won't press you in the matter." And he went away.

After dinner, when they were alone together, Blair thanked Everest for his great kindness to his daughter, a service which, he said, he could never repay.

"I think I can do you a kind of service now, however, I'm happy to tell you," said Blair; "but I hardly like to speak too positively. I fancy I may be able to help you to your own property."

"My property! What do you mean?"

"You recollect our talking at Paris, outside that cafe where we saw the gipsy-girl, about gold-digging; and I said there was gold to be dug up in England?"

"Yes."

"Well, by some extraordinary chance, I heard something that led me to believe there was a large sum of money lying unclaimed which should properly have been yours."

Everest was for a moment struck speechless at what he heard. When he recovered himself he said, "The cessation of my allowance, then, was caused by Benson's death; it is the same money?"

"It was Benson's money."

"Benson was a money-lender—a most unscrupulous scoundrel, from all I could learn. He was mixed up in a hundred disgraceful cases."

"Yes; he had a bad name whilst he lived; but he may let him rest at peace now he is dead."

"That's true. It was a shock, though, to find that the money I had been living on all these years—playing the fine gentleman—came to me through such an agency. It always puzzled me to know what he had got to do with it. Was it a kind of conscience-money?"

"No; it was not that."

"You know, then, who my relations were—who my father was?"

"I knew your father at one time. The lawyer will tell you all about him."

"But who was he, in a word?"

"Benson."

STEP IV.

"I'll go out and smoke a cigar," said Everest. "I want a breath of fresh air."

It was past ten o'clock, and Marseilles on a chilly autumn night, when there is a drizzling rain falling, is not generally very gay at ten. He found the street without quite deserted. Not a soul was to be seen.

Yes, one, That was the sound of a footfall behind him.

"Whist!"

Everest turned quickly, and found a man, muffled up in a comforter, and with his coat-collar pulled up round his ears, making mysterious signals.

"Don't say a word. Where is he? Is he coming?"

"Whom?"

"That infernal—you know whom I mean—Blair."

"Blair!" repeated Everest, in astonishment, "No. What has happened?"

"Come down this street. There's a wine-shop open there. I want a drink—I'm choking. What has happened? Nothing fresh. Wants to throw me off now he's got all he can out of me; but I'm not to be chucked off so easy. I said, 'See here Blair—I brought him to you, and you think he's your property; but I'll let him know who and what you are.' I swore I would, and I will, though I don't make a brass farthing by the job."

"Of whom are you speaking?"

"Of you. Who else should it be? You're in a trap. Blair is the biggest scoundrel unhung!"

FIGURE THE FOURTEENTH.

IN WHICH COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS BEFORE.

STEP I.—LITTLE JACK'S TROUBLE. "II.—AN UGLY DISCOVERY."

STEP I.

On the door of a genteel house near Poet's Corner, at this exact period of history, a highly burnished brass plate bore the name of Mouser, who was, the plate further informed those interested in the information, an accountant.

We have, however, little to do with Mouser, who might, or might not, have been able, if called upon, to satisfactorily account for himself and his accounting on behalf of others. Mouser had a personality, it is true, but behind him was a greater power. Mouser was the proscenium, as it were, and Blair, the leviathan book-maker, worked the machinery at the back, and raised or lowered the curtain, as events required.

One day, Dr. Trueman, with a troubled face and sinking heart, walked past the brass plate and tapped at the office door. Mouser called out "Come in!" and popped up his head to see who it was.

"Oh, it's you, doctor!" said he. "Mr. Blair's inside. He wants to see you, I think."

Then Mr. Mouser wrote something on a scrap of paper, and passed into an inner room. A minute or two afterwards the doctor was admitted.

"Well," said Blair, "you've brought the money, of course?"

"Well, no, I haven't," said Trueman.

"I thought not. What have you come for, then?"

"Well, as the money is due, I thought I'd better come."

"I can't see what point there is in that. However, as you are here, you might tell me—is that horse of Challice any good—the 'Flash' I mean? I did not see it run the other day. Has it any chance for the Derby, do you think?"

"As far as I know, there's nothing in the race to touch it."

"And that's the only thing he's got in his stable worth a button."

"I don't know that."

"I do, though," said Blair; "and I think it's a pity. If he could own the winner of the Cesarewitch, you see how that would send the other up."

"Why, the likely winner is your own horse!"

"Yes; I'm a good-natured kind of fellow, and I've made quite money enough—more than I want. You shall buy it of me for Challice, if you like; and the other I've entered for Criterion. I don't want a long price."

"What do you want?" said the doctor, with a meaningful smile.

"We'll talk of that some other day. Do you want your bill renewed? Let's see—seven hundred, isn't it? Suppose we put the interest on—make the new one a thousand, and hand you the difference."

When the newly purchased horse had won the Cesarewitch, Challice was, as I have said, beyond measure delighted.

"He's worth double the money we gave!" he cried. "We'll show them what we can do yet!"

After the second race was run, Blair, who was on the course, came up to Challice, and held out his hand.

"You're not dissatisfied with your purchase?" he said, smiling. "I have not the honor of knowing you,

but we ought to shake hands over the horse's victory. I ask your pardon if I'm a little out of order."

At any other time Challice might have declined the handshaking, or not relished it at all; but he was elated by his success, and just at that moment would have shaken hands with anybody.

"We ought to drink on it!" said he; and a bottle of champagne was opened.

Little Jack Jack rode Challice's horse on both these occasions, and his master tipped him very handsomely. After the second success, Jack, questioned concerning a rumor which had lately got about, replied, "Why not? There's no harm in it. The governor's going to. I don't see why I shouldn't get married, the same as other folks, if I think fit."

The rumor was true enough. Little Jack was about to enter the bonds of matrimony. Poor little fool of a Jack, but he did not think it at the time; indeed, it would have been scarcely politic to tell him so, unless you meant fighting. Within a month, though, of Jack's marriage, and shattering all his blissful dreams at one blow, came news that his father-in-law, whom he had always supposed to be well off, was on the eve of bankruptcy.

Little Jack's newly-married wife went into hysterics, and passionately implored him to save her unhappy father. The miserable man said he hardly knew how he could do so, and went into the stable, reversed a bucket, sat down upon the top of it, and took his head in his hands.

Presently some one tapped him on the shoulder.

"What's amiss, lad?"

It was Challice's amateur trainer speaking to him in a kind voice. Jack, yearning for some sympathizing soul to whom he could pour out all his sorrows, very quickly told his story.

"About how much would set the old man straight?" asked Dr. Trueman.

"Oh, it would take all of three hundred pound!"

"Only that?"

"Only!" repeated Little Jack, opening his eyes very wide.

"I might put you on to get it."

"You, sir? It would be awfully good of you! But how—by backing a horse?"

"No; by backing a bill—that's all! I think I know some one who would lend you the money. I've a notion I can get at him; but we ought to be sure of something first."

"That I can pay him back if my wife's father can't?"

"No, no; we must not entertain the thing at all unless we are quite sure it will set him straight. He's your wife's father, of course, and you are bound to do all in your power to help him—at least, that's the light I look at it in. Yet you must not place yourself in any difficulties for your wife's sake. Look here, Jack! you say your father-in-law's place of business is in London. I have to go to town myself to-morrow. I'll tell you what I'll do, Jack: I'll look the whole thing up, and if it's all square—well, the money's forthcoming at once!"

Little Jack, fit to cry with joy, clutched at his benefactor's hand.

"How can I thank you?" said he.

"You haven't got to," the other answered, with a laugh, slapping little Jack upon the shoulder as he spoke. "You're an honest fellow; that's enough for me! There's no obligation at all. You do your duty to the governor and the governor's horses; that's a good bit, if you do it well."

"I always have, sir, I hope?"

"Yes, you have."

And he patted little Jack once more upon the back before taking his departure.

"By jingo! he's the right sort!" cried little Jack, smiting his leg emphatically when the doctor had got right out of sight. "What should I have done without him?"

Poor little Jack!

As for the doctor, he very quietly traveled up to town, and bent his steps towards Poet's Corner. He found Blair there, as he had an appointment for some other business.

"I can square the jock," said Trueman, when the door was closed behind him. "What is it worth?"

In the afternoon of the following day Dr. Trueman returned to East Haggerford with three hundred pounds in Bank of England notes, took Jack's acceptance, and handed him the money as unconcernedly, Jack afterwards said, as though he had been handing him a simple pinch of snuff.

So much for Jack's joys and sorrows. For the present, they have no great weight upon the story in hand. Presently, much may come of them.

It was quite true that the governor was going to be married shortly. It was settled that it should take place in the early part of May. On the last Wednesday in the same month the Derby was to be run for. An eventful month this was to be.

STEP II.

THEY were to travel abroad.

They were at Venice just then—tottering, crumbling old Venice—that soft, dreamy city on the sea, that flippant tourists have striven in vain to vulgarize. They were lodged at a hotel, which had been a palace that had fallen into difficulties, and it stood upon the banks of the Grand Canal.

It was night. They had dined, and then gone out upon the balcony to look down upon the gondolas, with colored lamps, passing and repassing each other swiftly. The sounds of many voices, mixed with music, came floating towards them over the waters.

Challice was smoking a cigar. They neither of them were talking.

"It's not over jolly up here," he thought to himself. "This old tottering, tumble-down place gives one the horrors."

There happened to be a man with whom he was on speaking terms in the room below, seated at the window, and he went over and took his place by his side, and they began to talk about the Cambridgeshire, whilst they stared idly out at the curious scene upon the water before them. They had not been there very long, and Challice had his head turned away at the time, when his friend uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Look here Challice. You know that man, don't you, in the gondola there, staring up at the window above. He is bowing to some one. Do you see?"

Challice stepped out quickly upon the balcony, and recognized Everest, passing by in a gondola. He was leaning forward, and still gazing eagerly up at the balcony. As he passed away into the darkness, Challice looked up, and saw a portion of the skirt of Harriet's dress.

It occurring to him that he ought not to leave his wife alone much longer, and having now finished his cigar, he bade his friend good-night, and went upstairs.

Harriet was still sitting where he had left her. At the sound of his voice she started, and, hastily passing her handkerchief across her face, came towards him. He could not help noticing that she was agitated, and that her eyes were red and swollen.

"Come, my dear," he said; "you have been long enough out there; you will be catching cold. By the way," he added, presently, "were not you surprised to see Everest here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why, he passed in a gondola, and bowed to you!"

"Did you see him?"

"Yes, to be sure; I was just underneath."

She had her back turned towards him, and was leaning with her chin upon her hand, looking into the glass over the mantel-piece.

"Yes," she said, after a pause; "I was surprised."

"By the way," Challice observed, after another pause—a long one—"I don't know that there is anything very surprising in his being here. He must be somewhere. I suppose we ought to look him up? I wonder where he is, and what he has been doing all this while?"

* * * * *

She did not answer.

Next day Challice made some inquiries respecting his old friend, but could learn nothing about him. No one of the name of Everest was known at any of the principal hotels. The day after, the newly-married couple left Venice, and within a week were back at the Hall.

Mrs. Challice was waiting to welcome them, and took her daughter-in-law in her arms and kissed her tenderly.

"You have traveled too far, my dear, I'm afraid," she said. "You look a little pale and thin, I fancy."

Harriet saw another well-known face beyond, waiting anxiously, as it seemed, for her turn. It was Martha. She went forward, and kissed her mother's old servant.

"Martha does not live here," Mrs. Challice said. "We have given her a nice little cottage all by herself down the hill-side there, just outside the park, where she can be cosy and comfortable, and not be bothered by anyone. But she would come up to welcome you. She had been most anxious. You are late, you know."

Evidently there was some anxiety visible on Martha's face, though she strove to hide it from observation. Presently she whispered low to Harriet, "I must speak with you."

Harriet's heart beat violently.

"Is it about that?"

"Yes."

* * * * *

"Where on earth has Harriet gone to?" Mrs. Challice asked, about two hours later. "Have you seen her, Charles? She isn't in her room."

"She must be walking in the park. She will be here directly."

"But she will be late for dinner."

"She is with old Martha, I think. I'll go and look for her."

Challice rose, and went through the French window on to the lawn.

It was nearly dark, but he had not gone far when he saw Harriet's figure come out from among the trees, and walk rapidly towards him. He saw, too, when she caught sight of him, that she came to a momentary standstill, and seemed as though she hesitated, uncertain whether to advance or retire, just as though she were asking herself if he had seen her.

He advanced, and said, calmly, "We have been wondering where you were, you have been absent so long."

"I walked over to Martha's cottage. We were talking. I did not notice how the time was slipping away."

"We were very anxious."

"I am very sorry."

They walked on to the house without exchanging another word.

Dinner bell rang just then, and Challice hurried down stairs. Young Mrs. Challice had not come down when it was time to descend to the dining-room, and Charles's mother sent after her.

She was not in her room. The maid said she had not dressed for dinner. She had put on her hat and cloak, and gone out.

"Gone out!" cried Challice, in a sudden indescribable fear.

FIGURE THE FIFTEENTH.

IN WHICH THE RACE IS RUN.

- STEP I.—A WHITE, SCARED FACE.
 " II.—A BAD NIGHT.
 " III.—THE STABLE.
 " IV.—THE RACE.

STEP I.

SCARCELY knowing whether he were asleep or awake, Challice went out into the grounds by a side door. Upon the very threshold of it he was met face to face by his wife.

She was evidently much agitated. Her breath came short and fast. She clung to the door-post for support.

"Harriet, tell me what has happened?" he exclaimed.

But as she made no reply, he asked the question again.

There was a curious blending of impatience and pain in the tone of her voice.

"I am tired to death! I want to lie down—to rest! But tell me, where have you been?—what has occurred?"

"How you bother! I lost that bracelet you gave me. I dropped it somewhere in the park, and went back to find it."

"But why did you not say so? I would have sent some one, or gone myself."

"I was afraid to tell you, that was why. I thought you would be so angry. It is the diamond bracelet—the one you said was so valuable."

"Yes, it is worth a good deal. Whatever made you go out in it? It was a most extraordinary thing to do. But we must find it. I will send servants out with lanterns at once. Dinner is ready now, and my mother is in a dreadful state!"

"I cannot go in. You must make some excuse for me."

"Excuse! What can I say?"

"Anything; but I cannot go in—I cannot bear it. Besides, I am not dressed."

"That won't matter. Let me take off your hat. Why, your earrings are gone! and—Harriet, what is the meaning of all this?"

"I tell you, nothing. Charles, let me go up stairs. I—I am very ill!"

And she burst into a violent fit of sobbing.

"Hush, hush!" he said; "or you will be heard. All this sends me mad! Why, your ear is bleeding! Have you been robbed? The earring must have been snatched out!"

"Yes," she cried, suddenly facing round on him. "That is it. I was stopped in the plantation and robbed. Now let me go."

"But, Harriet, for mercy's sake, stay one moment! Can you give me any description of the man who did it? I'll send for the constables!"

"That is quite useless!"

"Useless?" he repeated.

"Yes; I can give you no description of him. It was so dark."

"So dark! But you said just now that you went out to find the bracelet. What does it all mean? Harriet, insist on knowing!"

"Don't speak so loud! These people will hear you. Go back to them—make some excuse, and leave me to myself for one hour. If you don't, I think I shall die!"

He let go of her arm, which a moment before he had been holding tightly, and she flew past him up a back staircase towards her room.

Challice passed his hand across his forehead, and seemed for a moment wholly incapable of thought or action. What did everything mean? His brain seemed in a whirl. When he turned to walk, he fairly staggered.

The rustle of a silk dress startled him, and, looking up, he saw his mother approaching.

"We—we must make some excuse for Harriet. She is taken suddenly ill. She is up in her room."

"I will go to her at once."

"Yes—no—presently, perhaps. Go back to the people. I can't face them just now."

"What will every one think?"

"I don't know, and don't care," he answered, sullenly. "I wish they were all at the bottom of the sea."

She pressed his hand, and with one tender, anxious look into his averted face, hurried back to the drawing-room, where, sure enough, the company assembled were beginning to feel not a little astonished and uneasy by the unusual delay, for dinner had been announced to be ready a good twenty minutes ago.

Challice, glad of a moment's reprieve, walked out into the open air, and looking up into the sky, spoke his thoughts aloud.

"I cannot send any one after this robber—if a robber exists. But was it true that she had been robbed? She contradicted herself twice. It was quite clear that there was not a single word of truth in the story she was telling me, for the second was as false as the first! But what is this mystery? Merciful powers! what shame and disgrace is at the bottom of this?"

He heard footsteps approach upon the gravel path at a quick pace, and a moment after the voice of the little lawyer called to him.

"Is that you, Captain? Bless me! What are you doing out here all by yourself? However, I am glad I found you alone. About that letter you wrote me from Boulogne?"

"A letter?"

"Don't you remember? You ought. A letter asking me to get you a couple of thousand pounds!"

"Yes; to be sure! I had forgotten it! I have a splitting headache!"

"Well, you'll excuse me if I say your letter gave me a splitting headache too! Why, my dear sir, the thing's an absolute impossibility! We are dipped, sir, as it is! We're confoundedly deeply dipped! I don't quite see how all the claims against us are to be paid off!"

"What an extraordinary thing it is there's invariably this absurd difficulty about ready money!" cried Challice, impatiently. "It is always just the same story."

"Captain Challice, it is quite out of the question. You couldn't raise it in any way I know of, unless you gave a bill of sale upon the house and furniture."

"A bill of sale. We're not bankrupt, are we?"

"You're not entirely solvent, so I don't deceive you, sir. But there, we'll get over it all right if—if you win the race!"

"Does it depend on that?"

"Captain Challice, I would not for the world have your mother know it, but that is the solemn truth."

"Whist!" said Challice; and he preceded his legal friend at a slow pace up the steps, and along the passage, to the dining-room.

Just above the place where they had been speaking was Harriet's bedroom. Neither of them looked up during the conversation, or they might have been frightened almost at the sight of a white, scared face peering out eagerly, the moonlight resting on it.

It was a beautiful moonlight night; scarcely a breath of air was stirring. Every word uttered down below was distinctly audible to the listener above.

STEP II.

THE company had at last sat down to dinner. The intelligence of young Mrs. Challice's sudden indisposition had been quite sufficient to account for the long delay, and for the temporary absence of Challice himself; but a damper had fallen upon those seated round this ordinarily joyous table, which the well-meant efforts of the most ready-witted entirely failed to dissipate.

Mumbling something about going to see how Harriet was, Challice got away from his friends, and passed up the passage where he and Harriet had had their last interview, really with the intention of getting out into the garden, where he could be alone, unmolested, unseen, and at liberty to think.

But this was not to be. His wife's maid met him, holding a note in her hand. He took it from her. It was in his wife's handwriting, and ran thus:

"My dear, I have something to ask you. I must ask you. I am afraid. Do not think me mad—mad. Forgive me; it will all be explained—explained. I know fifteen hundred pounds is a large sum, and without questions; but you will not mistrust without any questions, and all can be explained very soon. This is the truth. I feel very ill, and can hardly see what I am writing."

"Your affectionate wife,

"HARRIET."

Challice read through this extraordinary jumble twice, and stood there, with the paper in his hand, his lips moving faintly, but no sound issuing from them.

The maid, he presently remembered, was still waiting.

"Did your mistress want an answer to—this?"

"Yes, sir; she said so; but, poor thing, she is very ill, and I—I don't think she knows exactly what she wants."

"She is very ill, do you say? Has the doctor been sent for?"

"Doctor Henshaw, whom Mrs. Challice, senior, generally employs—the new doctor, we call him—has been sent for, but he was not at home; and I did not know what to do hardly."

"There is Trueman. He is cleverer than any of them. He's in the house now. He was not at dinner, but I saw him go into the billiard-room as we came away from table. Let him go up-stairs, and—and I'll see what he says presently."

The girl went away, and Challice darted through the door into the open air.

"What is going to happen?" he cried. "I cannot bear this much longer! Everything at once—everything at once!"

STEP III.

NOT very often did a horse go up and down in the betting as did Captain Challice's Flash o' Lightning. The amount of hedging that was done by her off and on backers was something wonderful.

As for the owner himself, he was so thoroughly upset by the events of that dreadful day I have described, that he almost wished he had never seen a race-horse in his life.

"I swear I'd scratch him!" he cried, wildly, one day; "but I can't. If he does not win, there's an end of me."

Harriet was now lying in a most dangerous state. Trueman said that she was suffering from brain fever. She did not know him when he spoke to her, and her talk was of the wildest. The lady's-maid said it frightened her, and she wished a substitute would take her place. Charles' mother then sent for old Martha, who heard all and said nothing.

Doctor Trueman had hardly time to attend to a sick lady; a sick horse was, just now, ever so much more important to him and thousands of other people, who would not have cared a snap of the finger whether Harriet had lived or died.

The other doctor, therefore, was sent for, and took Trueman's place. Challice, quite distracted, was no good at the stables, and Trueman's presence there was absolutely necessary. Two days before the Derby there was a howl of indignation in certain small sporting circles.

Greyhound, another horse of Challice's, entered for the race, and by many of the "knowing ones" thought to be a better horse even than the Flash, was scratched."

The intelligence astounded the owner himself. He suddenly awoke from a kind of lethargy, into which he had fallen, and sent a telegram to Trueman, who, with Jacks, had accompanied the horse to Epsom.

"By whose authority did you do what you have done about G.?"

The answer came very quickly.

"Leave it all to me: I will explain to your thorough satisfaction. Letter in the post."

When it came, the reasons given were good enough; but another letter from another person arrived by the same post containing a very ugly story indeed.

STEP IV.

THE night before the race Dr. Trueman and Jacky Jacks sat, smoking their pipes, in a snug little room.

A heavy rain was falling without, and the wind flung it against the window panes.

Jacky drew nearer to the fire, and rubbed his hands and shuddered.

"What's the matter, Jack?" asked his companion.

"I don't know," the jockey answered in a thoughtful tone. "Nothing that I know on. Some one passing over my grave, maybe."

"You're low-spirited, old chap; that's what it is," the other said. "Is it something wrong again at home?"

"You see, the wife's fond of dress and jewelry, and all that, and, I think, we're a good bit in debt besides."

"And—you can speak freely to me, Jack—she takes a—just a little too much wine, and don't know quite what she's doing with the money—eh? Have another pipe. What was that bother about the ring a little while ago?"

Jack turned white, and shook.

"How did you know that? Is it all over the place?"

"No; I stopped it going any further. I heard it from the man in the shop she took it from."

"She must have been tipsy, or mad. They made me pay heavy to hush it up. But she'll never do that kind of thing again. She's as square as square could be when she's—when she's herself. I won't smoke any more, I want to get to bed, and have a good night's rest."

Jacky, bidding him good night, opened the stable-door, pulling his coat high up over his ears.

"If this weather keeps on, it will make the ground heavy," said Jacky.

"It won't, though, or I am much mistaken. If it did, however, the Flash is quite strong enough to hold his own. Good night."

The doctor carefully closed the door, and, with his hands in his pockets, stood thoughtfully contemplating the horse, who pricked his ears, and leered round at him somewhat mistrustfully, as it seemed.

"Ah," said the doctor, nodding his head, "you're all right, so far. I'm not going to poison you, you know! Only a little cooling medicine, my boy, that's all! What's the time now, I wonder? It's rather too early."

He went upstairs to the little snuggery, poked the fire, and, sitting down at a table in front of it, pulled the lamp to him, and made a careful examination of the contents of a small bottle.

"That's the sort!" muttered the doctor. "Nothing violent. That's a fool's work. How long will Blair be now, I wonder?"

At that moment there came a sharp knock on the stable door below, which, before he had time to get down the stairs, was repeated still louder.

"What a noise he makes!" thought Trueman. "One wouldn't think he was one of the assassins. The owner himself wouldn't make himself more at home. It's so deucedly unlike Blair, too. He's one of the most cautious men alive, particularly when he's on a job as risky as this."

Stooping his head to the keyhole, Trueman, as a gentle hint to his friend that he might be more cautious in future, whispered, "Blair, is that you?"

"It is I!" replied the voice of the last person in the world the doctor expected to find upon the threshold of his stable; and, with a throbbing heart, he pulled back the bolts, and admitted Captain Challice.

"Is it you, sir?" said the doctor. "I didn't think you were coming down to-night."

"No," replied the other, shortly. "I did not intend to do so. I changed my mind. You've no objection, I suppose?"

"I?—no; of course not! How strange you seem?"

"I've had enough to make me. Fasten the door, will you?"

He spoke in a peremptory tone, which the doctor felt half inclined to resent; but, upon reflection, he sullenly did what he was bidden, then returned to Challice's side. Challice during this time entered the horse's stall and was carefully examining the horse's eyes, whilst he spoke to it in coaxing tones.

Apparently satisfied with the result of his scrutiny, Challice passed the doctor, and stood lighting a cigar at a jet of gas, with his back half-turned. The doctor eyed him uneasily.

"The rain's leaving off a bit," he said.

"Yes," Challice replied, shortly.

"Wet or dry, we'll win, sir. He's all right, isn't he? I've never left him for the last twenty-four hours more than five minutes at a time. I sleep here to-night, in the room above."

"That'll do. I'll keep watch down here below."

"You'll—keep—watch?"

"Yes. Why, there's nothing extraordinary about that, is there? You see I'm very anxious about the horse."

"Over-anxious, I might almost say."

"No. Look here!—do you know this handwriting?"

Dr. Trueman stared hard at an address upon an envelope the other placed before him, and he noticeably changed color.

"That letter's full of a pack of lies!—I'll swear it. The writer's a sneaking thief, who ought to be"—
 "All right, I've no doubt," said Challice, coolly; "but I'm glad he wrote to me. Look here what he says:

"Sir,—You are in the power of unscrupulous schemers. Trueman is only a tool in Blair's hands and has charge of your stable. Blair is laying large amounts against the Flash privately, but laying small sums on him in public. Trueman is at the same game. You can prove the truth of all this easily if you try.

"Your sincere well-wisher,

"ROLAND WAGSTAFFE."

Dr. Trueman read the letter, and for a moment remained silent. Then, clearing his throat, he said, "Have you tried to prove the truth?"

"No," replied Challice.

"Then your coming here insults me. It implies a suspicion of unfair play."

"I think it very probable I have been deceived—as far as you yourself are concerned."

"I know you have. Time will prove that. Good night."

"Are you going?"

"It can't want two of us. Good night."

And with these words, Trueman opened the stable-door and slammed it to behind him. He waited and listened a few feet off, and heard the bars being shot into their sockets.

"Curse him!" growled the doctor between his clenched teeth, and walked quickly towards the town.

At the inn where Blair was staying he found that gentleman alone in a private room, standing very comfortably before the fire, with his coat-tails tucked up, one under each arm.

"Well," said he, as Trueman entered; "it's all up, it seems. Rather pretty, eh?"

"You know all about it, then?"

"Yes," said Blair; "he came in here on his way. That is why I did not go up there. He did not see me. I saw him out of the window."

"We're not going to be beaten this way, and quietly put up with it, are we?"

"We will do the trick. You know what I told you about that fool of a woman, Jack's wife—shoplifting?"

"Yes."

"Well, she has been at it again; at least, that poor little beggar of a Jack must be told she has, to-morrow morning, half an hour before the race, and he will rope the Flash to save the woman. Do you see? I've sent her a message in your name, and she will be here presently. She'll drink if you ask her; then the rest is easy enough. Get her taken care of somewhere till to-morrow evening. Jacks must think she's gone up to town—in custody."

Trueman fairly gasped.

"This is a desperate game! What will be the end of it?"

"A fortune, if it answers."

* * * * *

Derby Day at last, and a fine morning.

Flash o' Lightning is once more at the head of the betting. Nemesis is next favorite; St. George next. Three o'clock's come. The course is cleared. The inevitable lost dog gets through the ropes at the last moment, and is hooted out of his small wits. "They're off!" No; a false start. Nemesis jibbing. A long wait; everybody within sight craning their necks. Now! No; Nemesis again. Now! This time really. Bravo, St. George!

An outsider in front, making splendid play, much too good to last! Then St. George; now St. George leading! Flash o' Lightning still in the ruck! Now Flash o' Lightning works himself forward as he rounds the corner! He is close behind St. George, and settling down into his stride. A yell of delight hails the sight; and then, as if frightened by it, he drops back. "What's Jack holding him back for? The scoundrel—he's roping him!" No! he can't do it—the Flash has got his head again! He is neck and neck with St. George! The white-faced, trembling rascal on his back is, seemingly, powerless to hold him! Thud, thud! The earth trembles beneath the horses' feet. A kind of spasm seems to pass like a wave across a sea of anxious eager faces, following something like a flying rainbow as it flashes by. Then a wild yell goes up, and men toss their hats high, and laugh and cry, and clutch one another by the hand; and some drop silently back, deadly sick, Blair and Trueman among the number, for Flash o' Lightning had won!

THE LAST FIGURE.

IN WHICH THIS MAD DANCE COMES TO A SUDDEN END, WITH THE DANCING MASTER'S DEATH.

STEP I.—A DEATH-BED SCENE.

II.—AN UP-HILL JOURNEY.

III.—A BARBER'S TALK.

IV.—TWO YOUNG LADIES PRATTLING.

STEP I.

IMMEDIATELY after the race, Challice telegraphed the glorious result to his mother, and the news, as may be easily imagined, filled her with delight. Even the trusty little lawyer felt half inclined, for the future, to give up all his prejudice against horse-racing. "But I do hope the Captain won't plunge any deeper," he hastened to add. "This ought to set us all right. Or it may be the ruin of us—there's no saying."

It must have been a very sanguine person who could suppose that Challice after this success would quietly subside into private life. On the contrary, he was backing Flash o' Lightning heavily for all possible

aces to come. The business he had to transact just now was so extensive he could not possibly go back to the Hall until after settling-day at Tattersall's. Challice, as has been hinted at once or twice, was very unbusiness-like himself; and, until he had engaged the services of Dr. Trueman, all his racing affairs had been conducted in a careless, slovenly style; and, more than once, he now had occasion to regret that he had been so hasty—for, he argued with himself, he had been hasty—in quarreling with the doctor. "It was all very clumsily done," he said to himself. "I might have watched him closely, and made sure that there was some truth in the accusation before I accused him." Nevertheless, after giving utterance to these sentiments, Challice was averse to anything like a reconciliation—there had been suspicion, and, after that, further confidence seemed to him impossible.

When Trueman came himself, very shortly afterwards, making overtures towards a friendly understanding, Challice told him this, not unkindly.

"If we are to part, let's part friends. Have a glass of wine with me. I don't know how you stand on the race, but if you backed the winning horse, I take it you've done well. Back him all through his engagements. Here's his health."

The doctor drank the toast, thinking, as he did so, that the wine would choke him, hoping that it would choke Challice.

"Of course," said the latter, "I am prepared to recognize the existence of an engagement between us, and you must have the proper amount of compensation. I want to deal fairly by you. I will give you three months' salary in lieu of notice. Just scribble me an acknowledgment. Thank you; that will do. Have you a receipt stamp? I've got one, I think, if you haven't."

He went to the other end of the room to fetch it from a side-table, and left Trueman in front of the wine-glasses and decanter. When he came back, in about a couple of minutes, the doctor was much paler than usual, and he put away the check Challice had given him with trembling fingers.

"You did not look at it," said Challice.

"Yes; thank you! It's very liberal of you, but I've my doubts whether I ought to take it without doing something for it. This is settling day. Have you got all in?"

"Pretty nearly. There's a good many thousand pounds in that desk, and, let me see, I'm too late to bank to-night."

"I must go. We'll drink one more glass together, if you have no objection?"

"None in the world. Here's luck to you!"

They drank, and then Trueman went down stairs to the bar, where he said he had to wait to see someone.

This scene took place at the hotel Challice usually put up at when he came to town. Presently, in about half-an-hour's time, the waiter came down, saying that the "Captain" was taken very bad, all of a sudden—a kind of cramp, and very sick; and he (the Captain) had suggested that he should see a doctor. It was fortunate that Trueman had not yet gone, he being a doctor himself.

* * * * *

A telegram reached the Hall two days later from Dr. Trueman, saying that Challice was dangerously ill, and that if his wife or mother wished to see him again alive, they must lose no time in coming up. Mrs. Challice, senior, had gone to visit some neighbors at a little distance, and some delay must necessarily occur before she could obey the summons. Harriet had left her room two or three days previously, but she was still very weak and ill. She, however, did not hesitate about what was to be done. A train would start for London in a few minutes' time, and she hastily dressed herself, and went up to town by it, sending a message to the mother to say what she had done.

Dr. Trueman had not sent a moment too soon. For some hours Challice's condition had been most dangerous. Hearing that he had a visitor he rallied a little.

"Mother!" he cried, faintly; but, seeing that it was his wife, an expression of bitter disappointment overshadowed his face, and with a similar feeling in her own heart, Harriet drew back from the bed. But, after a momentary struggle with himself, seemingly, the dying man stretched out his hand.

"You're better, I see," said he. "I've been very ill—awfully ill. I don't know what the matter is. I get better, then worse again. Supposing I should be carried off in one of the bad fits, I should never know whether or not you had played me false. You never loved me; that I am sure of. Why did you marry me? I suppose you would marry Everest if I died?"

"No, no, Charles! Let me tell you all. You will pity me then. You do not know how I have been persecuted; and I see now plainly that I should never have kept the secret from you, but my mother told me I must keep the secret from the world!"

She would have further pursued her confession, but at that moment a paroxysm of agony took possession of him, in which his sufferings appeared to be terrible, and his hooked fingers tightly gripped the crumpled bed-clothes. She was filled with dismay by the sight, and wildly besought Dr. Trueman, who stood by, to send for assistance.

"He will be better after that," said the doctor, feeling the prostrate man's pulse.

Challice, it was true, revived somewhat in about an hour's time; but his wits were then wandering, and in a broken voice, hoarse and passionate, he called her his destroyer, and bade her leave him.

"Go to him!" he cried,—go! He might have waited, though, a little longer!

Scarcely knowing what she was doing, and half frightened to death, Harriet left the room, and Dr. Trueman closed the door after her carefully. Half an hour later he was was ringing the bell loudly. When

the servants came up, he told them that Challice had had another bad attack, and that he was dead.

Dead, within only a few days of his victory, and with all the hard-gotten money lying idle in his desk! Not all of it, surely! A couple of hundred pounds was all that presently was found, when a search was made.

STEP II.

THE day following Charles Challice's death was a bright and beautiful one in the country, and there was plenty of excuse for a certain travel-stained, ragged, hatchet-faced fellow's sitting down in a pleasant, sheltered spot, at the end of a lane leading into East Haggleford High Street, to rest himself and smoke his pipe. He took his seat on an old-fashioned stile, which—goodness only knows why—had been left standing there amongst the houses most incongruously. The hatchet-faced man looked around him curiously, and shook his head.

"How the place has changed!" he said. "I should hardly have known it. What's become of the old inn, where I was robbed? And, let me see, there was a barber over there—I forget his name, though—and a Mrs. Legg, or Wegg, or Kegg, who had a provision store. All gone! How awfully sharp everyone looks, too! It's not the place it was! It would take anyone all his time to pick up a living here now!"

Apparently disgusted with the result of his survey, the hatchet-faced man got off the stile, and slowly descended the hill, in the direction of Haggleford Hall. He knew the way quite well, and where there was a weak place in the hedge, dividing the shrubbery from the high road; and, squeezing his way through this, he climbed up a bank which he found upon the other side; but when he reached the top of the bank he found directly facing him an object, the presence of which he was very far from expecting or desiring. It was a fur-cap, surmounting a bullet head, round the bull-dog throat below which a gaudy silk handkerchief was twisted. The owner of these articles of clothing was also smoking a pipe and gazing heavenwards in the direction from which the first man appeared suddenly, and so his eyes fell upon him directly. As they did, he started and ceased smoking. The other was similarly taken aback.

"Spicer!"

"Dick Deverel!"

Deverel advanced slowly, and drew up in front of his old comrade.

Spicer spoke. "This is a queer meeting. I did not expect to find you here; but it is as well."

"You stole my money," said Deverel, fiercely; "and you shall pay me for it!"

"Come, come, Dick!" the other cried, with a laugh, pretending not to notice his angry expression, but, for all that, keeping a very steady and watchful lookout, lest any sudden surprise might be intended. "Come! don't let us talk about stealing! And as to your money—well, that's not bad for you, you know! If I did steal it then, as you call it. I haven't spent it, if that's any consolation to you. At least I haven't spent nearly all. I saved some for you—I did, Dick, really and truly!"

Dick impatiently kicked over a pebble.

"I don't understand you," he said.

"I daresay not," replied Spicer. "You've never tried to. You wouldn't join me when I wanted, and it was a wicked way you were wasting good material. I couldn't stand by and see it done, and so I took it away. Can you blame me?"

"No," replied Deverel, suppressing his momentarily increasing rage with an effort; "you were quite right, I daresay. I ought to have joined you, and we might have succeeded much better in company."

"Far better!" said the other; "and can now, if you like! Why, you only flew at small game! There are papers in that book which are a perfect annuity properly handled—a forged bill, for instance. I've done well by that as it is, and shall do better!"

"A bill, drawn by John Challice, and accepted by Charles Challice?"

"That's it! You know of it, then?"

"You've presented it?"

"Well, not to the acceptor! Not so green! You see, I knew how the old woman, the wife's mother, had been well-nigh flayed alive. But I've managed the wife with it pretty well. She paid freely—got a bit desperate," he said, with a coarse laugh; "for she was shortish of money, but I took some of her jewelry on account—a bracelet, worth rather more than double what I asked, but I didn't mind; and—and—as she was going, I saw the moonlight on her ear-ring. 'That's pretty, ma'am,' says I; 'I'll take care of that, too.' She sorter screamed out, and held out her hand to cover them; but I was too quick for her, and made a snatch."

"A snatch?"

"Yes. What's the matter? I meant having them. Well, Dick, to-day I'm to see her again, and I'm to have a good round sum on account. She's been very ill, or I should have seen her before, but she'll not fail me to-day. I've kept the screw on properly, I can tell you!"

"Ah!"

"Yes, Dick. You ought to have joined in with me. Why, how do you think I came to know the worth of that precious scrap of paper, and many other things worth knowing besides? I never told you I was old Benson's clerk at one time, and he got me fourteen years. If I'd found him alive when I broke out of jail, I'd have made short work of him. I swore I would as I left the dock. But he died conveniently the same night, and I ransacked his old shop down there, getting very little of any value to myself for my pains. No value to myself, you know, Dick, but to you, my boy. However—you know best."

"Show me this famous forged bill that you have

"sound so valuable," said Deverel, seating himself with assumed carelessness, by his companion's side. Spicer smiled.

"I haven't got it with me, Dick, or I would in a moment. Do you know, I've got into a way of not carrying all my luggage about with me. It's too risky. You see, for one thing, this is rather a dangerous neighborhood for me, and so I don't like to run two risks—being caught myself, and losing my little livelihood at the same time."

"So you keep it in some place of safety?"

"Exactly: in the Haggelord bank. I've an account there. Like to see my check-book?"

Deverel did not echo the other's laugh, but rose to his feet.

"Can I see you presently? Are you sleeping at one of the inns?"

"No—yes; but we'll meet up at the top of the hill. Do you know a lane there is coming out, just opposite where the old inn stood? Well, there's a stile at the end of it nearest the inn; will that do at five this evening?"

"Very well."

As he spoke, Deverel turned upon his heel, and walked back up the embankment he had a while ago come down.

Spicer looked after him with a half-smile.

"Strange kind of fool, that Dick!" said he, and relit his pipe, that had gone out whilst he had been talking.

Deverel walked straight until he was fairly out of the sight and hearing of his late companion, and then came to an abrupt halt, and dropping down upon his hands and knees crawled back among the brushwood.

After a time, he came once more in sight of the spot where he had left Spicer sitting upon the trunk of a felled tree. He was there now, smoking and cogitating. Deverel, lying flat upon the earth, watched him narrowly. For nearly two hours he remained thus, his eyes hardly for a moment quitting the figures before him. He saw that Spicer waited very patiently for some considerable length of time, then began to grow impatient, and looked out afar, evidently expecting some one who was behind the appointed time. Whenever Spicer looked out afar, Deverel, in his turn, craned his neck, but no one came, and so the time passed very slowly for both.

At last, when full two hours had elapsed, Spicer sprang to his feet, swearing savagely and trampled fiercely through the bushes, passing but a few yards from the spot where Deverel lay hidden. He walked quietly onwards, and never turned his head, so that Deverel was able to follow without much trouble, and yet not be seen.

The old mill-stream, it may be remembered, no longer passed under the bridge ending the High Street. The bridge had been abolished altogether, and the course of the stream diverted, after some delay. Unfortunately, the delay had been longer than the miller could battle with, and so the mill was closed and fell into a ruined condition in a wonderfully short space of time; the sails now and then revolving, it is true, when there was a strong wind on, but grinding no corn.

To this mill, which was left deserted to rot and fall if it thought fit so to do, Spicer now bent his steps, and when he got within a dozen yards or so of it, turned round to see whether any one was about. Deverel had only just time to conceal himself hastily. Spicer apparently feeling satisfied that he was unobserved, walked round the back of the mill, and disappeared. Deverel waited for some time, and not seeing anything more of him, felt certain that he had entered. In another moment he had reached the spot. There was, sure enough, as he had thought there would be, a door at the back of the mill, and it was only pulled to, not fastened. Opening it with all the care he was capable of, he slipped in, and crept up a creaky flight of stairs.

At the stair-head, in a second doorway, Spicer stood motionless, waiting for him.

"It's you, is it?" he asked. "Why didn't you give some sign? Come in."

The words were carelessly spoken, but it was sufficiently evident to the other that Spicer would much have preferred that his hiding-place would have remained secret.

He gave way, and Deverel stepped across the threshold, and entered resolutely. Within, all was plunged in a dense obscurity. There was the end of a candle sticking in a broken bottle. Deverel lighted it with a match he took from his pocket.

"We can see one another better like this," said he. "Outside, it is too light for it to attract any notice."

"There's no fear," replied Spicer. "If any one sees it, he will say it's a ghost, that's all."

"Spicer," said his companion, in a strangely calm voice, "you know why I have come?"

"To talk over business, I suppose."

"No; to ask you to give me up that pocketbook and its contents."

"That's unreasonable," Spicer retorted. "You had it once and lost it. You ought to have taken better care of it."

"If there is yet money left in it, as you say, I do not want to take it all. A small sum will content me. If there are other bills than the one I want, you can take them."

"For the matter of that, two-thirds of the renewed bills are valueless now. There has been a kind of commercial panic at this place; pretty well all the old townspeople have gone to the bad. There's only one bill I set any store by. I won't give that one up."

"Which one is that?"

"John Challice's forgery."

"That is the one I must have. Where is the book hidden?"

Involuntarily, and quick as lightning's flash, Spicer's eyes glanced towards a corner of the room, then reverted to Deverel's face.

"I haven't got them here, if that's what you mean?" he said.

"That's a lie!" retorted the other, bluntly. "Give them up."

"Not with my life!"

Deverel, without another word, strode across the floor towards the corner where, sure enough, the pocket-book was hidden. But, the moment his back was turned, Spicer drew a loaded revolver from his breast, and placing the muzzle against Deverel's ear, fired. A quick movement of the head, as he felt the contact of the iron, prevented Dick from being killed on the spot; and, the ball glancing from the skull, settled in the shoulder, tearing the muscles as it passed.

The wound was a fearful one; but, for the moment, its effects were not such as to wholly cripple the sufferer; and, turning, he clutched at the weapon Spicer still held in his hand, flinging himself, with all his strength, upon the would-be assassin.

Thus they fell heavily to the ground; and, turning, Deverel fell undermost. At the same moment, another barrel of the revolver was discharged, and Dick lay crushed beneath an inert mass, heavy as lead. The contents of the barrel had entered Spicer's brain.

STEP III.

I, THE teller of this tale, wanted to be shaved the other day, and stopped in front of a very showy shop in a rising suburb, the exterior of which was of so imposing a character that I hesitated about entering.

One thing, however, decided me—the inscription over the door, which ran thus:—"Pidgeon, *Coffeur de Paris*—late Rook;" the name of "Rook" being partly obliterated by a kind of flourish, somehow seemed to me to have something fiendishly triumphant about it, like the crowing of a game cock after a victory.

It was Mr. Pidgeon, from East Haggelord, sure enough, with more plumpness than of yore, and a bland, fatuous smile enveloping his foolish face.

"Shave, sir? Yes; we don't cultivate that branch of the business, sir, since the late proprietor—retired. Ha, ha! Beg pardon, sir. Of course, yes. I shall be only too happy. Will you take a seat?"

"Yes, sir; Rook was his name. I can't rightly say where he has gone to for certain. I don't think he's doing as well. Dabbled in building specs, sir, and burnt his fingers. Does this razor go easy?"

"Ah! you may well say that, sir—Haggelord is changed. The old Hall that so much money was wasted on gone into other hands—family quite broken up. Dreadful thing that about Captain Challice's poisoning, wasn't it?"

"The trial, and all that, killed his mother. I saw Trueman hanged. Nearly got off, though, through the bungling of the other doctors at the trial. Ah! he was a cute one! I've shaved him often. Never would have thought that he could do a thing of that kind, to look at him."

"Do I do anything in betting? Well, no; I can't say I do very much. Mrs. P. don't like it; and what little I do's quite on the quiet, like. Got a safe thing for St. Leger, I've a notion; had it straight from Blair, the leviathan book-maker. What a man that is, sir!—what a head!"

"Well, yes; he lost the action against Captain Everest—that's true. There was an odd thing—old Benson's will turning up, after all, in the possession of the legitimate son, and leaving all the money to the illegitimate! What a fool he was not to destroy it! Perhaps he meant to do so; but some say he had no idea he was related to the old money-lender at all. It was found on his dead body. That's what they call the 'Irony of Fate,' ain't it, sir? Know Mrs. Pidgeon, do you? You seem to know all the East Haggelord folks. She's down-stairs now, sir, nursing the baby. Shall I call her?"

STEP IV.

A PALE, pretty lady, with something of a faded loveliness upon her sad face, sat, early last autumn, upon the pier at Ramsgate, talking to a grave, gray-haired gentleman, of military appearance; and he stooped his head and talked to her earnestly, but in a low, trembling tone.

"Some day, perhaps, Harriet," he said.

"Perhaps?"—she answered, and laid her hand gently in his.

Just at that moment two girls passed by, talking and laughing.

"A dancing-master in love!" said one. "How awfully ridiculous!"

The band was playing one of Godfrey's waltzes, and the rest of their talk was drowned by the music.

Perhaps, after all, it is ridiculous for a dancing-master to be in love.

THE END.

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